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# *Young La Fontaine*

A Study of his Artistic Growth  
in his Early Poetry and First Fables

*By*

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## Foreword

**I**n the spring of 1948, around the time this study was begun, the merchants of the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris collaborated in a costly publicity program, hiring eminent artists and decorators to fill their store windows with scenes from the fables of La Fontaine. This scheme may have been a commercial failure, since visitors took far more interest in the beautiful window displays than in the gloves or jewelry or perfume inside the shops, but it proved to be a huge popular success. Young and old, rich and poor flocked to the exhibition and stood in line for hours to see the fanciful beasts and birds who are among their favorite characters in literature. For La Fontaine is the most cherished and widely read of all French poets. He holds a place in the culture of his country comparable to that of Shakespeare in England or of Cervantes in Spain. School children study him year after year and take delight in his storytelling, mature readers return to him nostalgically and with new appreciation for his gentle satire or his understanding of human foibles, simple folk place the fables beside the family Bible and find in them an encyclopedia of wit and practical wisdom, writers and critics unanimously admire the subtle poetry of a highly gifted artist.

But La Fontaine is esteemed not only as a poet, he is everybody's friend. His gentle character, his absent-mindedness, his innocence and irresponsibility, his unwise loyalties, his flirtations, his forgetfulness of wife and family, have come down through the centuries in countless anecdotes which will never cease to be repeated. He is loved as an amiable weakling, as a gay companion who needs a helping hand. Much of the legend is false, of course, and much of it was forged by the poet himself, who was in ways a very prudent man and understood the value of publicizing his follies. This intimate and almost blind attachment which Frenchmen feel for him has made him a sort of national institution. The French are inclined to say that his personality is so Gallic, or his language so rich in native subtlety, that he cannot be understood by foreigners—just as the English claim that Shakespeare cannot be exported across the Channel.

Such suppositions, born of the most natural pride and prejudice, have little to warrant them and sometimes stand in the way of a healthy interchange of viewpoints and ideas. Authors like Hemingway, Dos Passos, Faulkner and Richard Wright are intensely and peculiarly American, yet have won perhaps their most sympathetic following in France. Similarly La Fontaine, in the last few decades, has been read and enjoyed and even studied very closely in many foreign lands. His poetry is relished in every country where the language and literature of France are taught. Many of the manuscripts and early editions of his works have been eagerly acquired by collectors in Great Britain and the United States. An Englishwoman, Monica Sutherland, has completed a biography of the poet which, it is hoped, will soon be published. In 1939, an Italian scholar, Vittorio Lugli, brought out one of the most sensitive and enthusiastic appraisals of his art ever written; his book *Il Prodigio di La Fontaine*, seems to have passed almost unnoticed in France. It is ironical that the excellent study by Karl Vossler, *La Fontaine und sein Fabelwerk*, is better known in Latin America than in Europe, thanks to a widely circulated Argentinian translation done in 1947. By far the most research on La Fontaine, and the best of it, has been performed by French scholars, but how many of them have read the German dissertations on him by Margarete Cordemann and Josef Mousset, or the excellent articles on his style by Leo Spitzer and Theophil Spoerri? It may gratify them to know that his fables have been discussed by various critics, one of them Chinese, on a countrywide American radio program, *Invitation to Learning*, and that one of America's most distinguished poets, Marianne Moore, has devoted much of her time in recent years to translating the fables into English verse. All great art is, or ultimately becomes, international property. The pages which follow have been written in the hope of offering a sincere tribute, however modest, to one of France's best ambassadors.

This essay, limited in its scope, seeks to trace the development of La Fontaine's literary art, through the years of his apprenticeship and as far as his first tales in verse and the fables of 1668. It is not a biography or a "life and works;" many biographical facts are mentioned but only because they help to suggest the atmosphere in which his talents matured and seem to contribute to the nature of his poetry. Nor is it intended as a critical evaluation of his early

writings, in spite of the fact that it dwells on and interprets certain compositions which have never before been thoroughly studied. These impressions are personal and will need to be confirmed or denied by other readers of La Fontaine. The study of his sources is also of no immediate concern here, although his treatment of sources has been examined wherever it illuminates his poetic technique. Finally, no attempt is made to do justice to all aspects of the fables of 1668—they have already inspired many excellent studies and appreciations and will never cease to do so. The fables, like the early tales, are considered here primarily as manifestations of genius finding itself and soaring to maturity.

My aim has been to write a study in the realm of literary history, or rather in one of its shadowy and less scientific dependencies. I have sought to reconstruct and describe La Fontaine's "formation littéraire," the acquisition and growth of the faculties which made him a great poet. Putting together whatever facts can be found, examining the conception and composition of his earliest works, weighing the aesthetic problems he posed and the solutions he arrived at, I have tried to survey his development as an artist in the long formative period culminating in the publication of his first volume of fables in 1668. Much conjecture enters into this, for it is impossible to determine precisely when La Fontaine was attracted to the teachings of Plutarch and Montaigne, or when he first read Virgil and Homer, or when he became a disciple of Marot. Many of the sources and influences are intangible ones, for who can tell what literary memories may have contributed to certain personal attitudes or opinions, and to the rhythm or balance or tonality of certain lines of poetry? But the evidence is available, and I trust that I have used it wisely, to show the main currents of La Fontaine's progress as a poet: the theories and traditions which weighed on his mind, the metamorphoses of the literary genres which he pondered and recreated, and the evolution of his poetic style.

The early career of La Fontaine has of course been discussed by many other scholars, but *only* incidentally, as a small part of some larger design. I am greatly indebted to the painstaking research of such men as Louis Roche, Ferdinand Gohin, Gustave Michaut, René Bray, and Pierre Clarac. At times I can do no better than repeat what they have already said. But if some fragments of my subject have been treated previously, the whole of it has always

been neglected, or perhaps avoided, because of its complexities and uncertainties. It has been my ambition to put together all the facts, and hints, and guesses, and contradictions, in a fairly straightforward and reliable account of La Fontaine's artistic development. I shall be satisfied if I have sharpened the focus of this hazy problem and thrown enough new light on the origin of the tales and fables to make them better enjoyed and understood, particularly by English-speaking readers. I have tried to steer a middle course between scholarly and popular presentations, hoping that my book will prove readable and interesting to anyone who loves French literature, whether he be a college student, a professor, or a business man.

It is a pleasure to express my appreciation to many libraries and librarians, both in this country and in France, for their unfailing cooperation in providing me with the necessary materials for my research. I wish to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a fellowship grant in the year 1949-50, which gave me the leisure to undertake this work, and also the Graduate School of Northwestern University for a grant-in-aid to prepare my manuscript for publication. Numerous friends and colleagues have given me the benefit of their knowledge and advice. Above all I am indebted to Professor Cornelia C. Coulter of Mount Holyoke College and to Professor Henri M. Peyre of Yale University, both of whom have most generously read my manuscript and made suggestions for its improvement. Their wisdom will perhaps help to compensate for some of my shortcomings, notably my own small Latin and less Greek.

My greatest thanks are due my wife, Charlotte R. Wadsworth, a constant source of inspiration, guidance, and sympathetic criticism. Many hours have been stolen from her, much assistance has been denied her in the care of our children, during the writing of this book. To her it is gratefully and affectionately dedicated.

## Note on References

Annotations have been employed as sparingly as possible. The notes for each section, grouped with the bibliographical data pertaining to it, are to be found at the end of the book.

Short references are incorporated in the text itself, usually within parentheses. Since the numbering of La Fontaine's tales and fables is standardized in all modern editions, they are referred to by number rather than by page. "*Contes*, I, 2" means the second tale in Part One: "*Fables*, III, 4" means the fourth fable in Book III. A similar system, when adequately clear, is extended to the cantos, chapters, poems, lines, etc. of other works cited, such as the odes of Horace or the *Decameron* of Boccaccio.

For La Fontaine's other writings I have provided page references to one of two editions. Occasionally I cite the *Grands Ecrivains de la France* edition, by Henri Régnier, Paris, 1883-92, 11 volumes (abbreviation: Régnier), which is sadly out of date but contains much valuable commentary on the poet's sources and allusions. The best text of his miscellaneous works, the one to which almost all my references apply, is the excellent one-volume edition of his *Œuvres diverses*, in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* series, by Pierre Clarac, Paris, 1942 (abbreviation: OD).



## CHAPTER I

# The First Thirty Years

### *1. Family Background.*

Few great artists have matured so slowly or so calmly as did Jean de La Fontaine. Up to the time when he published his first fables at the age of 47, his life seems to have unfolded without pattern or direction, as though he were awaiting a propitious moment, ripening like a vintage wine. He drifted along, apparently, untouched by great events, immune to serious emotional conflicts, with no ambitions to disturb his slumbers, and spent his waking hours in aimless, omnivorous reading. According to a widely accepted legend he learned his art without effort or discipline and eventually produced his fables as naturally as an apple tree bears fruit.

This hasty impression is only partly true. As one studies the existing information about La Fontaine's early life one finds two distinct stages in his development. First there is a rather obscure and empty period, lasting about thirty years, characterized by idleness and indecision. He grows up, receives his education, tentatively embraces one career after another, and seems unsure of his real interests and talents. A second period, of roughly 15 years, begins in the early sixteen-fifties. La Fontaine has decided to become a writer and embarks on a literary apprenticeship which is unsystematic but very serious and comprehensive. He imitates various ancient and modern poets, tries his hand at many literary styles and genres, has a few minor successes, and gradually masters the graceful, discreetly personal technique of his tales and fables. If this second phase is better known, and thus appears more active and fertile, it is quite probable that the first one played a more important part in his intellectual and artistic growth. His formative years, seen in the dim light of a half-dozen facts and several unreliable anecdotes, afford only a few rare glimpses of his complex personality.

Born at Château-Thierry in early July, 1621, he was baptized there on July 8th at the church of Saint-Crépin. A large town on the

Marne some fifty miles east of Paris, Château-Thierry is still, as it was 300 years ago, a market center for the farms and vineyards of the Champagne plains, a tranquil place in peacetime but a battlefield in every war. La Fontaine was accustomed to the sight of passing armies and of villages which had been pillaged or destroyed. The first half of the seventeenth century was a turbulent era, marked by the Thirty Years War, by bitter religious strife, by political conspiracies, and by a costly civil war (the Fronde). If many careers tempted La Fontaine, he never showed any desire to become a soldier. The time and place in which he was brought up may have inspired the horror for warfare which is apparent in all his poetry. A need for security, a streak of unheroic cautiousness and selfishness, contributed greatly to the pattern of his literary career. Even when celebrating a military victory he could not refrain from expressing his yearning for peace, a fact which may perhaps help to explain his failure to win favor at the court of Louis XIV, a very bellicose monarch.

But that was much later, and was partly a question of age. La Fontaine belonged to the "pre-classical" generation of Furetière, of Maucroix, of Tallemant des Réaux—all born in 1619, of Molière, who was born in 1622, and of Pascal, born in 1623. As he grew up he idolized Louis XIII and Richelieu, heroes whom he would admire even after their death, and even after the long regency which followed. It is a curious anachronism to see La Fontaine, in 1663, at a time when everyone is paying homage to Louis XIV and Colbert, make a pilgrimage to the village from which Richelieu took his name and write a deeply sincere poem of tribute to the Cardinal, who has been dead for over 20 years. While the poet was still in his early teens Louis XIII and the Cardinal made three prolonged visits to Château-Thierry. The boy must have seen them repeatedly and perhaps he was even presented to them, for he came from a family of some importance in that locality and his father as "*maître des eaux et forêts*," was a minor government servant.

His mother, whose maiden name was Françoise Pidoux, had been married to Louis de Jouy, a prosperous businessman in Poitou. After her husband's death she married Charles de La Fontaine, in 1617, and bore him two sons, Jean in 1621 and Claude in 1623. Besides his brother Claude, Jean had a half-sister, Anne de Jouy, and a number of cousins scattered around Château-Thierry, notably



Pierre Pintrel, the translator of Seneca, who may have guided his first steps as a poet. But his half-sister and his cousin were considerably older than he and Claude, and his parents were advancing into middle age. At the time of his birth his mother was already 39 years old and his father was presumably no younger. Surrounded by mature people, Jean and Claude were probably very closely attached to one another, at least throughout their boyhood. One suspects that they were seldom allowed to romp boisterously through the house and that they played rather quiet games, read many books, and in good weather stayed out of doors exploring the town and the nearby countryside.

Sometimes Jean may have accompanied his father on trips to inspect woodlots or fishponds, knowing perhaps that he would eventually inherit his father's post as game and forest warden. Father and son also had other qualities of mind or tastes in common. The character of Charles de La Fontaine is known mainly through the legal papers involved in settling his estate, which was heavily encumbered with debts. Jean managed to pay back the creditors and in this sense was more scrupulous than his father, but he was no more provident, had as little flair for earning money, and finally had to sell all his assets and accept the help of various wealthy benefactors. When one pictures Charles de La Fontaine as an elderly and rather impractical man it is not difficult to believe Charles Perrault's statement that he encouraged his son, even required him, to try his hand at writing poetry. Perrault adds that "although this old fellow (*ce bonhomme*) knew almost nothing about poetry he never ceased to love it passionately, and he felt unbelievable joy when he saw the first verses which his son composed."<sup>1</sup> The affectionate epithet "*bonhomme*" which has become almost a nickname for La Fontaine, seems to have applied equally well to his father. It is quite possible that the future poet, while still very young, gained from his father some of the enthusiastic appreciation of the "good old poets"—Marot, Ronsard, Desportes, R gnier—which was to have a profound and lasting influence on his later works. At least he had the good fortune to spend his childhood in an atmosphere where books were enjoyed and authors were respected.

The house where he lived—and which has been partially restored and turned into a municipal museum—was a handsome Renaissance structure located in the best part of town, the substantial home of

an established middle class family. His father sometimes affected the title of "écuyer," although he had no real claim to noble rank. If Jean did not belong to the aristocracy, neither was he a country bumpkin. His near and distant relatives included many doctors and lawyers. A town-dweller close to the country but within easy reach of Paris, he had a solid middle class background which put him in touch with all types of society and endowed him with the broadly realistic view of life, the sense of relativism, perhaps the sense of humor, which are so often lacking in authors stemming from the highest or lowest social levels. There are two great families among French classical writers, the noblemen—such as Retz, La Rochefoucauld, and Saint-Simon—and those of bourgeois or professional extraction—like Molière, Pascal, Boileau, and La Bruyère—and La Fontaine is clearly a kinsman of this latter group. The accidents of birth and environment gave La Fontaine an admirable starting-point for his literary career. Not the least of his blessings, as the scion of a respectable, prosperous family, was the chance to obtain an adequate education.

## *2. Studies in School.*

Next to nothing can be said with certainty concerning La Fontaine's early education. One of his first biographers, D'Olivet, who was not always well informed, made the comment that La Fontaine "studied under country teachers who taught him nothing but Latin."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he went to some small school in the vicinity of Château-Thierry, or perhaps he had private tutors. Another possibility is that he attended the Collège de Château-Thierry, an institution which enjoyed a good reputation in the early seventeenth century. At least he was not sent far from home, for the records of his parish church show that he took part in baptismal ceremonies there, during the school year, when he was nine years old and again at the age of twelve. But a few years later, around 1635, he seems to have traveled to Paris to complete his education, going to the same school as Antoine Furetière, the future novelist, satirical poet, and compiler of an important dictionary of the French language. Acting as a character reference for La Fontaine, in 1652, Furetière stated that he had known him for over 16 years and had attended school

with him.<sup>2</sup> His comment does not name the school or give its location. But Paris was the main educational center in France and Furetière, a Parisian born and bred, would have had little reason to seek a school outside the capital. And La Fontaine, whether or not he was a serious student, would have gravitated quite naturally to Paris, the goal then as now of every young Frenchman in search of a richer, more stimulating life. How long he stayed in Paris, if Paris it was, can only be conjectured. The normal course of events would have been for him to pursue his studies another 4 or 5 years, receiving his bachelor's degree when 18 or 19 years old.

But even the glitter of Paris could have offered little compensation for the strict discipline, the dirt and discomfort, the wretched diet, and worst of all the incompetent teaching, which prevailed in nearly all seventeenth-century schools. La Fontaine's attitude toward teachers, in his later works, is remarkable for its bitterness. He doesn't merely make fun of them; he hates them. And, curiously enough, he is equally severe when speaking about students in school:

Certain enfant qui sentait son collège,  
Doublement sot et doublement fripon,  
Par le jeune âge, et par le privilège  
Qu'ont les pédants de gâter la raison . . .<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, these lines contain some elements of traditional satire and they were written in an age when children seldom received sympathetic treatment, at least in literature. But, taken together with La Fontaine's many other comments on the cruelty of children or with his well-known indifference toward his own son, they perhaps reveal something of his own nature as a boy and as a youth in school. One gains the impression that he suffered during his years at the collège, that he had only a few intimate friends there, and that he was shocked by the crudeness and empty-headed barbarity of most of his schoolmates. He seems to have been quiet, sensitive, somewhat timid, and perhaps already rather absent-minded or intent on his own dreams and fancies.

No matter how pedantic his teachers, and even if he paid little attention to them, he must have absorbed some knowledge and above all a thorough mastery of Latin. Students spoke this language (or a modern, half-French version of it) in their recitations, they wrote themes in it, they studied Latin grammar and rules of rhetoric, they

read and imitated authors from the whole range of Roman literature. This kind of educational training, a major influence on the development of classical literary doctrines in France, left an indelible mark on La Fontaine. He will read Latin with ease and translate it with great skill, he will begin his career by writing adaptations of Terence and Ovid, his verse will often echo the prosody of Latin poets, his ideas on art will be charged with memories of Horace and Cicero and Quintilian. There is some doubt that he acquired, while still in school, his profound affection and appreciation for the best Latin authors; this probably came later, when he could reread them at his leisure, free from the distracting commentaries of pedagogues and grammarians.

Most schools attempted to give their students some grounding in Greek—the alphabet, the elements of syntax, some simple readings—but resorted to Latin translations when dealing with difficult writers or when presenting the philosophical works of Aristotle (the final stage of study in the usual collège). La Fontaine may have read some of the fables of Aesop in the original tongue for, along with the Latin fables of Phaedrus, they were traditional school texts, accepted as wholesome and beneficial for young minds. He seems to have learned Greek but not enough to read the language easily. In his own fables based on Aesop he sometimes goes to the Greek source for a word or a phrase but generally he follows a Latin version, even repeating obvious mistakes in the translator's rendering. Both D'Olivet and Louis Racine indicate that he was an avid reader of Greek literature, but in Latin translation. Once more, however, there is a distinction to draw between his formal education and the literary activities of his maturity. He may have absorbed little Greek in school but, some forty years later, he became an enthusiastic admirer of Plato and translated one of Plato's dialogues into French, submitting his work (which is now lost) to the Grand Condé for approval.<sup>4</sup> But here again he probably approached the Greek text with the help of a Latin translation.

A book, now lost or destroyed, which may have been a classroom text studied by La Fontaine, has given rise to many suppositions. The volume contained selected dialogues of Lucian, with the Greek text and Latin translation on opposite pages.<sup>5</sup> It bore on the title page, written and later crossed out, the name of Louis Maucroix, older brother of François Maucroix (who eventually became La

Fontaine's most intimate friend), and on three pages the name "De la Fontaine." Did Louis pass the book on to François, and did François idle away some moments in class by writing his comrade's name in the book? Unfortunately there is no other evidence to show that François Maucroix went to school with La Fontaine, or even that he was acquainted with him prior to about 1645. If this mysterious book reveals nothing about the poet's education it at least provides an interesting appreciation of his character. One of the inscriptions, presumably written by François Maucroix or his brother, was reported to read as follows: "De La Fontaine, bon garçon, fort sage, fort modeste." A likeable fellow, but gentle, reserved, and modest—these same words would keep recurring whenever any of La Fontaine's friends spoke of him, to the very end of his days.

### *3. Religious Instruction.*

In the first half of the seventeenth century an intense revival of Catholic faith swept over France. While Jean de La Fontaine was still a boy, monasteries and religious orders were being established, Richelieu was waging military campaigns against the Protestants, and Catholics throughout France were moved by a crusading spirit and a reborn sense of solidarity. One of the main pivots of Jean's childhood existence must have been the parish church of Saint-Crépin, with its Sunday services, its lessons in the catechism, and its colorful celebrations of saints' days and special festivals. Whatever schools he attended he probably received some degree of religious instruction along with his other training. The collège at Château-Thierry was supervised by the abbot of the nearby Abbaye du Val-Secret and some of the teachers may have been members of the local clergy. Most of the schools in Paris were controlled either by the Sorbonne theologians or by the Jesuits. Even the volume of Lucian's dialogues was a textbook prepared by a Jesuit priest. One need not wonder that La Fontaine stayed in step with his times, that he had strong religious convictions, and that he even ventured to embark on an ecclesiastical career.

On April 27, 1641, shortly before reaching the age of twenty, he entered one of the seminaries of the Oratoire—a community of priests founded by Bérulle in 1611—and began his studies for the

priesthood. Viewed in the light of his later pleasure-loving life, this action has always seemed extraordinary. Yet it does not go contrary to the pattern of his youth and can be explained quite logically in a number of ways. The fervor of adolescence, the advice of some priest or professor, the example of some friend such as Furetière (who was to become an abbot and who had two brothers in the Oratoire), the piety of his younger brother Claude (who joined him at the seminary six months later and became a clergyman for life), any of these influences would suffice to explain his taking holy vows, particularly if he already felt certain literary aspirations. It was a common practice for men of letters to seek a clerical post that would pay their livelihood and allow them ample time for writing. As elder son he could count on inheriting certain resources from his father, but perhaps not until ten or twenty years hence, and he had reached the age when he should choose a profession and make some effort to support himself. The Church beckoned and Jean accepted the call, if only on a trial basis; the vows of the novitiate were not binding. After 18 months as a probationer, he parted company with the priests of the Oratoire and returned to Château-Thierry.

This period of a year and one half, fairly well-known in certain details, must have provided La Fontaine and his superiors with overwhelming proof that he had no vocation for the priesthood. According to tradition he studied first at the home establishment of the Oratoire, in Paris, but was soon sent to the Académie royale de Juilly, a school which the order had recently established, near Meaux. Here he is said, but on poor authority, to have amused himself by dangling bits of bread from his window on a string, to feed the chickens in the poultry-yard below. Then, in October of 1641, he entered the seminary of Saint-Magloire, in Paris; official records state that he was sent there to overcome his serious deficiencies in theology. If his daily life corresponded to that of the typical Oratoire neophyte he arose at four in the morning, put on his cassock, devoted an hour to prayer, then spent most of the day in classroom work and the study of sacred literature. But this rigorous intellectual program was relieved a little by short periods of recreation and physical exercise, by conversation after meals, and by seven hours each night allotted to sleep. To La Fontaine, always notorious as a late-riser, this schedule must have seemed a severe hardship. But his greatest

difficulties were his inability to concentrate on abstruse theological doctrines and his tendency to see the humorous side of every situation. There are fairly authentic anecdotes which report that, instead of studying Saint Augustine, he used to read Honoré d'Urfé's pastoral novel, *Astrée*, and that he composed some lines of verse making fun of the prayers used by the Oratoire. This incident, the first hint of his aptitude as a poet, seems to have got him into trouble and may have caused his withdrawal from the seminary.

If La Fontaine had little taste for the clerical life, he was far from being a libertine, remained a good Catholic, even experienced periodic surges of profound religious feeling, and frequently devoted his pen to pious themes. His close contact with monks and priests gave him a fund of detailed knowledge which he employed satirically, even bawdily, in his tales in verse, but this satire was traditional and not intended as subversive. His knowledge of the scriptures is revealed in many a biblical allusion scattered through his tales and fables. If he sometimes poses as a stoic or a cynic or an epicurean in his fables, he expresses more often and with more personal conviction his belief in the Christian idea of Providence, in an all-wise God interested in the welfare of living creatures. Seldom a model of virtue, La Fontaine nevertheless clung stoutly to the faith of his fathers. There is no doubting his deep sincerity in his paraphrases of psalms, in his *Discours à Mme de La Sablière*, in his approval of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in his last letters to Maucroix. He would commit many follies, then suffer pangs of remorse; and this alternation of paganism and piety continued through his lifetime, culminating in his abject repentance, his so-called "conversion," as an old man.

It was perhaps his recurrent awareness of his sins, his fits of self-criticism, that brought him close to the Jansenists of Port-Royal. This austere religious order with its stern moral doctrine emphasizing the corruption of man and denying his freedom of will, attracted many priests, notably some of those of the Oratoire, and enlisted the help of several gifted authors. La Fontaine took no part in the bitter quarrels between Jansenists and Jesuits, and indeed counted three or four Jesuits among his friends, yet frequently showed his sympathy for the Jansenists and their followers. Two poems which he composed fairly early in his career and circulated privately in manuscript, are inspired by Pascal's *Provinciales*

and like their model ridicule the casuistry and the easy-going moral code of the Jesuits (*OD*, 488-491). If these pieces reveal something of La Fontaine's sense of comedy, they also suggest that he saw nothing but a satirist in Pascal and that, despite his leanings toward Jansenism, he could not take religious controversies very seriously: his rôle is that of an amused onlooker who stays at a cautious distance from the battleground. Some years later, when Port-Royal was no longer under attack, he collaborated openly with his Jansenist friends in the editing and publication of the *Recueil de poésies chrestiennes et diverses* (1671), and devoted much serious effort to *Saint Malc* (1673), a poem based on a text by Arnauld d'Andilly and stressing the Jansenist theme of marital chastity. His praise for solitude, his portrayal of hermits (*e.g.* in *Psyché*) reflect the pastoral tradition but may also owe something to the "solitaries" of Port-Royal. The Jansenist view of mankind as a fallen race may well have contributed to the misanthropic attitude which dominates many of the fables in the collection of 1678, aided by the pessimistic ideas of La Rouchefoucauld, the trend toward scientific materialism, and most of all his own disenchantment as an aging man. But La Fontaine is seldom solemn, or even consistent, for very long. In his most characteristic comment on the Jansenists, in a gay letter to the duchess of Bouillon, he pays them all due respect but recoils before the severity of their moral teachings (*OD*, 669).

His final fable, *Le juge arbitre, l'hospitalier, et le solitaire* (XII, 24), brought him back to the threshold of the church where he had stood as an impressionable young man. But the fifty years between were not a period of exile or of disbelief. Irreverent but not irreligious, maliciously satirical but never bluntly sceptical, La Fontaine read Boccaccio and the Bible with the same enthusiasm and found inspiration in both. He flirted intellectually with doctrines which stemmed from various thinkers and philosophers, but without espousing causes, without any betrayal of his own personality. If his religious feeling was not always profound, or only when conscience plagued him, it never disappeared completely. The fables, with so many wholesome moral lessons, with their tones of pity for the weak and the oppressed, would seem to have been written by a Christian whose faith was firmly rooted. At least they were written by a man with many Christian qualities of character.



#### 4. *Aspirations as a Poet.*

For many years, from his student days to the height of his success as an author, La Fontaine divided his life between Château-Thierry and Paris. Countless times he traveled the road back and forth between the two places. When he lacked funds his parent's home offered a haven, but his heart remained in Paris and he returned there for prolonged visits whenever an opportunity arose. Upon leaving the seminary, around April of 1643, he went to reside with his family in Château-Thierry and it was there, the following winter, that he was first awakened to his poetic vocation.

The anecdote is posthumous, too colorful to be entirely true, and perhaps largely apocryphal, yet it carries a ring of authenticity and must have had some sort of factual basis. According to the Abbé D'Olivet, La Fontaine, when 22 years old and still uncertain of what career to follow, happened to hear one of Malherbe's odes read aloud, "avec emphase", by an officer in winter quarters at Château-Thierry. He listened to the recitation of this ode—the one which begins, "Que direz-vous, races futures . . ."—with a sort of absent-minded or trance-like exaltation: "avec des transports mécaniques de joie, d'admiration, et d'étonnement." He was impressed just as though he had been a musical genius, brought up in some secluded forest, who was hearing for the first time a well-played musical instrument. He began at once to read Malherbe intensively, spending the nights learning his poems by heart and declaiming them by day in the woods, and soon undertook to write verse himself, in the manner of Malherbe. So the story goes (D'Olivet, II, 303-304).

But La Fontaine could scarcely have remained deaf to poetry until the age of 22; remember that his father was a lover of verse (but perhaps of the work of poets less lofty than Malherbe). The event recorded by D'Olivet, no doubt with some degree of exaggeration, would seem to prove at most that La Fontaine suddenly gained an appreciation for the musical qualities of a certain type of poem, *i.e.* the vigorous, imperious odes of Malherbe. And quite possibly it was at this moment that he began to take poetry seriously, to study professionally the poetic technique of various ancient and modern authors, and to be aware of his own gifts and aptitudes. In the life of every great artist there is an instant of crystallization, when he takes possession of himself and sees his mission revealed.

Whatever poetry he composed in the sixteen-forties has disappeared and its nature can scarcely be surmised. Doubtless some rather pompous imitations of Malherbe. And, if D'Olivet can be believed, one of La Fontaine's relatives named Pintrel (probably his cousin Pierre) soon opened his eyes to the beauty of Latin poetry and persuaded him to model his style on the simple elegance of Horace, Virgil, and Terence. This might account for his adaptation of a comedy by Terence in 1654. Yet La Fontaine himself, in *Adonis* (1658), while claiming that he is trying out a new, elevated tone, adds that his previous efforts have been limited to idyllic descriptive pieces:

Je n'ai jamais chanté que l'ombrage des bois,  
Flore, Écho, les Zéphyr, et leurs molles haleines,  
Le vert tapis des prés et l'argent des fontaines. (*OD*, 3)

But these nature poems, if written, have never been found. A further contradiction is presented by his only surviving bits of verse which seem definitely to belong to this early period: three smutty songs arising from his joyous companionship with Maucroix (*OD*, 477, 863). Not enough dates are known, not enough documents are still in existence, to permit a strict chronological survey of the stages in La Fontaine's progress as a poet. And, even if the facts were available, they would probably not point to an orderly development, a systematic approach to one style after another, but rather (as in his later career) to a multitude of simultaneous experiments in various manners and genres. The poet who liked to claim "Diversité c'est ma devise" never lost his enthusiasm for Malherbe yet always found as much pleasure in the bucolic scenes of Virgil, the enchanting myths of Ovid, the charming buffoonery of Marot, the gallantries of Voiture.

His intoxication with poetry made it all the more imperative that he find some sort of remunerative post or profession, and, having failed as a priest, his next best chance was the law. Although he is first cited as a lawyer in a contract dated 1649 he probably devoted himself to legal studies in the years around 1645 to 1647. It was easy to obtain a degree in law, more a matter of paying certain fees and passing some perfunctory examinations than of mastering a prescribed course of study, but he doubtless acquired some competence in legal matters, enough to carry out his duties, later on, as

"*maître des eaux et forêts*." He also absorbed a considerable knowledge of legal vocabulary and proceedings: such terms as "*contredit*" and "*interlocutoire*" often find their way into the fables. Indeed there are many fables which take the form of courtroom scenes, with disputants arguing their grievances before some judge or arbitrator. But La Fontaine never became a practicing lawyer and one can infer from his frequent and vehement jibes at magistrates and at the slow-moving, costly machinery of the law, that the profession held little charm for him. Perhaps the greatest advantage of his training in jurisprudence was that it gave him a pretext for many long stays in Paris.

In these years 1645 to 1647 he is mentioned in a precious manuscript<sup>1</sup> as one of a group of aspiring authors who called themselves Knights of the Round Table (perhaps "*La Table Ronde*" was the name of a Paris cabaret where they held their meetings). They assembled once a week, preferably after dinner, and read aloud their latest literary compositions. The joyous, convivial tone of these gatherings is suggested in an anonymous epistle, supposedly written by Maucroix, which reproaches La Fontaine for making an abrupt trip to Château-Thierry and forgetting to say good-bye to his friends:

*Epître, va chanter injure,  
Mais grosse injure, à ce parjure  
Qui, par un étrange ourvari  
S'en est fui dans Château-Thierry . . . (fol. 95)*

The festive circle included some six or seven writers of the same age as La Fontaine, all born between 1619 and 1624, all of them barely beginning to make themselves known in the literary world. Antoine Furetière, his former comrade in school, probably brought him in touch with the group. Other members were François Casandre and François Charpentier (hellenists and minor poets), Paul Pellisson (who would help him win the patronage of the finance minister, Fouquet), Tallemant des Réaux (a gossip collector whose wide acquaintances would prove useful to him), and perhaps Antoine Rambouillet de La Sablière (whose future wife would provide a home for him). These contacts—and some of them would develop into permanent friendships—are rich in significance for the shaping of his later life, but one name outweighs all the rest: François

Maucroix, who was to remain his dearest lifelong friend. Maucroix is an interesting personality who deserves to be better known. Born at Noyon in 1619, possibly acquainted with La Fontaine in school, he took a degree in law, became a tutor or secretary to a young noblewoman and fell passionately in love with her, then after her marriage bought a canonship at Rheims in 1647 and settled down to a carefree yet studious clerical life. His literary works—light, gallant verse and many sober translations of Greek and Latin authors—are less important than his companionship and collaboration with La Fontaine. They had in common a taste for pleasure, an eye for pretty girls, and a keen sense of literary values. It seems certain that almost all the tales and fables were submitted to Maucroix for criticism before being published, and many were doubtless revised in accordance with his suggestions. Only a few letters between the two men have come down to us but they are enough to show that La Fontaine counted heavily on the encouragement and understanding which Maucroix offered him.

One would look in vain for any trace of pious crusading among these Knights of the Round Table. If two of them (Furetière and Maucroix) became Catholic clerics, two others (Tallemant and Pellisson) were Protestants and Cassandre was an atheist. Libertinism doubtless held some attraction for them all, at this stage in their careers, and La Fontaine may well have taken then his first taste of Gassendi's epicurean philosophy, along with his first steps toward a rather dissolute, irresponsible way of life. The knights errant knew no grail but the tavernkeeper's goblets and they worshipped only at the altar of the Muses. They were sowing their wild oats, enjoying life to the fullest, but they had one serious preoccupation: poetry.

At one of their meetings Pellisson recited a heroic ode on the death of Pisani (the son of Mme de Rambouillet), at another Furetière read a satire ridiculing the jargon of the medical profession. On another occasion the aging poet François Maynard, a disciple of Malherbe, was their guest of honor and entertained them with some epigrams in Latin verse. Their deference toward older, well-known writers reveals the earnestness of their professional ambitions. The young poets of the Round Table kept paying their respects to certain men ten or twenty or more years their senior: Jean Ogier de Gombauld, the abbé Michel de Marolles, Gilles Ménage, Jean Chapelain, Valentin Conrart, and Olivier Patru. The last three of these

were influential figures, deans of the literary world, from whom La Fontaine would seek advice and approval as he prepared his first tales and fables for publication.

There is a book of verse by Furetière which is almost surely a product of the sessions of the Round Table and seems to reflect their spirit. His volume of *Poésies diverses*, although not published until 1655, was written some years earlier—"au sortir du collège . . . dans la chaleur de la jeunesse, et dans la démangeaison d'être auteur," as he says—and is dedicated warmly to some unnamed friends who inspired the composition and helped in the correction of his work. It contains not only the satire on physicians, which carries here a dedication to Conrart, but other pieces addressed to Ménage, Marolles, Pellisson, Maucroix, and Cassandre. An epistle to Cliton, who is reproached for spending his time lazily "au pays champenois" when he should be working at poetry in Paris, seems to be intended for La Fontaine, or possibly Maucroix.<sup>2</sup> The book offers a certain number of precious, sentimental pieces (madrigals, enigmas, elegies), together with many poems which belong to the realistic, familiar tradition: incisive and rather coarse epigrams, playful epistles in verse, and a series of exuberant, hard-hitting satires—on the peculiarities of poets, lawyers, and shopkeepers—which are worthy predecessors of those by Boileau. It is quite possible that La Fontaine, without losing any of his admiration for Malherbe, wrote satirical verse of this same sort—but with a gentler, more graceful touch than Furetière—and was already mastering the style which he would display in his tales twenty years later.

To an ambitious young man in love with literature these years in the sixteen-forties must have afforded vistas of wonderful new horizons. In Paris it was a gay, peaceful period with only faint reverberations of distant battles at Rocroi and Dunkerque. The theatre was prospering as never before and La Fontaine could see the comedies and best tragedies of Corneille and Rotrou, as well as plays by Scarron, Du Ryer, and many other playwrights. There is little doubt that he took advantage of these opportunities, for the stage fascinated him and he was to make repeated efforts to gain fame as a dramatist. A professed lover of music, he could hear concerts by singers and instrumentalists; perhaps he was already acquainted with the musicians Niert and Lambert; and beyond doubt he attended performances of some of the first Italian operas

introduced in France, notably Rossi's *Orfeo* in 1647 which would leave a strong impression in his mind (*OD*, 615–618). He was surely aware of the publication of novels by La Calprenède, of philosophical works by Descartes and Gassendi, of volumes of poetry by Gombauld, Boisrobert, Saint-Amant, and Tristan l'Hermite.

For above all he was drawn to the world of books, which he explored ardently, reading everything that crossed his path. The bookshops in Paris, the personal libraries of his friends, perhaps the well-stocked shelves of Valentin Conrart, on all sides new discoveries and adventures awaited him. There is nothing to show at what date he became acquainted with certain authors and in all probability his readings were extremely unsystematic. He would spend whole days dreaming his way through a pastoral or heroic novel, then dip into the poetry of Ovid or Terence, then turn with equal zest to Plutarch or Rabelais, to Homer or Boccaccio. By the time he is ready to publish his first poetry he will possess a very rich cultural background, gained through long years of browsing in every field of literature. Essentially self-taught and with few pedantic prejudices to hamper him, La Fontaine will follow his own fancies and fulfill his own needs. He will accept as mentor any author, ancient or modern, in whom he finds an echo of his own tastes and aptitudes.

### 5. *The Forest Warden.*

La Fontaine would have liked to prolong these carefree days of his youth and occasionally he looks back at them with a nostalgic sigh:

Pour moi le monde entier était plein de délices:  
J'étais touché des fleurs, des doux sons, des beaux jours;  
Mes amis me cherchaient, et parfois mes amours. (*OD*, 603)

But it was time to put an end to escapades and love affairs, time to seek some measure of security and settle down to a more sober life. In 1647, the year when his friend Maucroix entered the Church, he agreed to take a wife and to follow in his father's footsteps as "maître des eaux et forêts." He faced this decision under pressure from his father and, as always, he yielded obligingly. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Tallemant's comment on his mar-

riage: "Son père l'a marié, et lui, l'a fait par complaisance."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he was aware that his inner freedom, his artistic life, would not be greatly changed. In any case he accepted, for financial reasons, a companion who, as it turned out, could not hold his affections permanently (but could any woman have done this?) and who, at the time of their union, could have had few intellectual interests in common with him. When the marriage contract was signed, in November of 1647, La Fontaine was 26 and his bride, Marie Héricart, was fourteen and one half.

She came from a good family in the nearby town of La Ferté-Milon and brought with her a substantial dowry, valued at 30,000 livres. For his part La Fontaine had some property inherited from his mother (the date of her death is not known) and some expectations from his father. His marriage to Marie Héricart seemed to provide the basis for a fairly comfortable existence and also it happened to furnish some new contacts which would have an important effect upon his career. His wife was related to the family of Jean Racine and probably had some part (around 1660 when the future dramatist was only 21 years old and still completely unknown) in making Racine and La Fontaine acquainted with one another. Also, in the more immediate future, through her aunt's husband, Jacques Jannart, she would help La Fontaine attract the interest and patronage of Nicolas Fouquet, the finance minister during Louis XIV's minority. Jannart, originally from Château-Thierry, was a prominent lawyer in Paris and served Fouquet as his delegate to the Parlement. He had a house in the heart of Paris where La Fontaine and his wife could stay whenever business or pleasure brought them to the city. And there is no doubt that the poet with or without his wife frequently took advantage of his uncle's hospitality and thus was able to keep in close touch with his friends in literary circles. In a document dated 1652 a certain François Martin, "bourgeois de Paris," stated that he had known La Fontaine well for the past four years.<sup>2</sup> Since this was precisely the period of the Fronde, the mock-heroic civil war between the Paris Parliament and factions of the adventure-seeking aristocracy, he may have witnessed some of the picturesque scenes of the struggle and formed then certain ideas—apparent in his fables—on the vanity and selfish irresponsibility of high-ranking noblemen.

The early years of their married life seem to have passed happily

enough, with no sign of discontent on either side. (The stories of La Fontaine's infidelities, and of his wife's reprisals in kind, belong to a later period.) For several years he lived as indolently as ever, learning something of his father's duties, reading many books, now and then visiting his wife's relatives in La Ferté-Milon and Paris. In 1653 he could rejoice at the birth of his son, Charles, and having dutifully fathered an heir, he dismissed the boy from his mind and paid no further attention to him. His child, like all children, failed to interest him; his mind was elsewhere. For by this time he was often in Paris, trying to launch his first major literary work and, when in Château-Thierry, his new post as forest warden kept him fairly busy.

Although his marriage contract had specified that he was to receive one of his father's positions (or an equivalent settlement in property), for some obscure reason it was not until 1652, and then by purchase from a third party, that he acquired the title of "*maître particulier triennal des eaux et forêts*" and "*capitaine des chasses*" for the duchy of Château-Thierry. At this moment the duchy had just come into the hands of a new "*seigneur*," the duke of Bouillon—who along with other members of his family would treat La Fontaine as a good friend and sometimes help him out of trouble—and the duke was expected to buy back the various offices pertaining to his duchy. But this repurchase was carried out very slowly; La Fontaine continued to exercise some of his functions until the beginning of 1671, *i.e.* for a period of almost 20 years. His duties, which he seems to have performed in a reasonably conscientious fashion, did not lack variety and had the virtue of placing him in touch with people of every social class. The regulation of hunting, fishing, and wood-cutting all came within his province. If he had to devote certain days to dusty documents and records there were others when he could make his rounds along rivers and through forests, chatting on the way with peasants, woodchoppers, or huntsmen. On regular occasions he acted as a sort of municipal judge; he conducted hearings and rendered decisions on such questions as poaching, trespassing, and delinquent rents, which landlords and farmers brought before him. His knowledge of town and rustic personalities, his understanding of a wide range of human types—in a word the comedy and the universality of his tales and fables—must have been greatly enriched through the tasks which he performed as a



forest overseer. Whether they caused him to be a nature lover and a nature poet is a somewhat more delicate question.

There is no longer any need to combat Taine's deterministic theory which made La Fontaine the product of the Champagne countryside and called his bantering wit the result of the racial stock prevailing in that region. If the theory might conceivably account for the spirit of his light, immoral tales in verse, which seem reminiscent of old folk stories and *fabliaux*—but which also owe much to Boccaccio—it obviously fails to explain his imitations of Ovid, his taste for the preciousness of fashionable salons, or the many types and tones of poetry to be found in his fables. As for the countryside, it was a rather flat, prosaic province, unlikely to inspire poetry, one might think; yet it gave rise to two great (and very different) poets, Racine and La Fontaine. Apparently genius shows little respect for the influence of climate and geography. And, if some artists grow up in sympathy with their early environment there are others who revolt against it and seek an opposite mode of existence. La Fontaine was not rebellious, far from it, but one must face the facts that he spent a large part of his youth and young manhood in Paris, that he got away from Château-Thierry and went to the city whenever possible, and that he settled down in Paris to live out the last decades of his life. It should be noted also that his close contact with nature began rather late, after his formative years were over; he did not become “*maître des eaux et forêts*” until the age of 31.

Literary historians have acquired the habit of calling La Fontaine an interpreter of nature and thus a unique exception among the poets of his century, who presumably kept their eyes closed to the beauties of the world. The truth is that his interest in natural scenery was rather limited and, by more modern standards, very slight indeed. When Corot went to Château-Thierry in 1863 he was impressed by the picturesque hillside with its tree-lined road winding up to the old castle on the summit and affording a view of the town's roofs and spires below, and he immediately made a painting of the scene—a scene which La Fontaine had viewed countless times and had never bothered to mention in his writings. Descriptions of landscapes, for their own sake, occur occasionally in his letters but very rarely in his poetry; the many delightful little descriptive passages in his fables are really stage-settings,

sketched in outline, with as few strokes as possible, and presented to make the characters and dramatic incidents come alive. And often he approached nature through books rather than through direct observation; the lines where he seems most in sympathy with the outdoor world are in many cases echoes of passages in Virgil's *Georgics* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A recent investigator, Professor Mornet, has demonstrated that La Fontaine's attitude toward nature was no different from that of his contemporaries. Like many other authors of the period he had a healthy appreciation of country life, tended to advocate simple rustic pleasures as an antidote for the hypocrisy of city and court, dwelt both morally and esthetically on the theme of solitude and seclusion, and even found a fleeting voluptuous melancholy in the spectacle of solitary places. Mornet concludes that La Fontaine's originality was not in the impressions he received but only in his ability to convey them in poetry, in his powers of evocation and expression. This is true enough but it fails to do justice to the personal qualities of his art, to his genius for identifying himself with his subject. In his fables he could commune sympathetically with the crushed buds of a fruit tree (*douce et frêle espérance*, IX, 5) or with the fearful trepidation of a hare (*Un souffle, une ombre, un rien, tout lui donnait la fièvre*, II, 14). Whether he is translating Virgil or conjuring up a scene in some forest or barnyard his heart is stirred, deeply and sincerely. And he always confides these emotions to his readers. Without display or overemphasis, above all without losing his sense of humor, he reveals his feelings toward nature more intimately than any other poet of his age.

His experience as a supervisor of woodlands and game preserves made him neither a rustic nor a Romantic but it gave him a store of knowledge, necessarily rather limited, which he would exploit very profitably in his fables. It is perhaps regrettable that his only extended journey took him no farther than Limoges. He never saw the ocean or the jungle or any wild mountain scenery. His poems and fables are situated in the only area he knew, the region from Paris to Château-Thierry and Rheims, a land of farms, gardens, vineyards, gentle hills, meandering streams, and small well-tended forests. His rabbits, poultry, and foxes are perfectly at home there but his lions and elephants seem out of place, as though wrested from their native habitat and tamed for some zoo or circus. There

is no need to raise the silly and much-debated question of La Fontaine's accuracy as a painter of animals: he was not a naturalist but a creator of literary characters. Little in his animals is drawn from life, for they are obviously composite creatures, partly traditional in appearance and temperament, partly based on human models, partly the products of a very playful imagination. What is more important is that La Fontaine's world, if not a spacious one, was known to him in its every detail. When he sketches farms or brooks or forests, when he portrays milkmaids or woodcutters, when he comments on the miserable lot of the peasantry, when he stresses the greed and cruelty of the common man, his voice carries authority and conviction. Alone among the poets of seventeenth-century France, thanks to his professional tasks, La Fontaine possessed a thorough understanding not merely of the charms but also of the hard realities of daily life in town and country.

#### 6. *The Butterfly on Parnassus.*

When La Fontaine took office as "maître des eaux et forêts" he reached a turning point in his life. As though spurred on by his new employment—or perhaps because it gave him a sense of security—he began working seriously at literature and, within two years, in 1654, he had his first book published. At the gateway to his long and active career, finally ready to seek the acclaim of readers and critics, what manner of man was young La Fontaine? Like a careful card player he has not shown his hand; he has left no trail of juvenile manuscripts, notebooks, or letters which might clarify his artistic preparation. But he could not extinguish his personality—it is reflected everywhere in his way of life, in his later comments on himself, in his contacts with other people—and it offers some clues which may foster a better understanding of his literary works.

The fact that he turned to literature rather late and kept his best years to himself has ordinarily been attributed to laziness or lack of ambition. His early life was indolent and sheltered; nothing forced him to make his own way in the world; and while he could he clung to an easy-going existence, reading rather than writing, storing up experience rather than seeking to communicate it. Even in the days of the Round Table he had achieved a reputation of

idleness; the same epistle which accuses him of unceremoniously deserting his comrades pardons him as a "bon garçon," incapable of malice, and probably half-asleep when he wandered away:

Belle paresse est tout son vice.  
Et peut-être quand il partit,  
À peine était-il hors du lit . . .

He acquiesced in this legend of laziness and even helped to cultivate it—perhaps he found it a useful excuse when faced with unpleasant tasks or duties. But writing poetry is not an easy, sleepy occupation, as Valéry has pointed out, but one requiring the alert use of many mental faculties. If some of La Fontaine's letters and bits of galantry are effortless improvisations the fact remains that he composed a substantial body of serious prose and poetry—as much as Boileau or Racine—to which he gave extremely close attention. The revisions found for certain fables, the variants of *Adonis*, the marginal corrections in *Psyché*, the discussions of esthetic problems in his prefaces, all bear witness to his painstaking craftsmanship. The air of facility and naturalness which characterizes so many of his works is a calculated technique, laboriously mastered.

Along with laziness, his best-known eccentricity is absent-mindedness. There are countless anecdotes (some reliable, some quite preposterous) which show him failing to listen to people's conversation or making a trip and forgetting the purpose of it, or losing his money and papers. But these stories give the impression that he was a dull and foolish person (La Bruyère's portrait of him as an old man is particularly cruel) and should be counterbalanced by other facts which are sometimes overlooked: his vivacious conversation on subjects which interested him, his social gifts which made fashionable women seek him out, his skill in dealing with Fouquet and obtaining a pension from him, his seriousness and ambition as a man of letters, his keen intelligence and artistic sensibility which all his friends respected, his acute powers of observation. He indulged in forgetfulness when he wanted to; it was another trait of character which he very shrewdly advertised and exaggerated, to protect his freedom. He often commented on his lapses of attention: "Quand une rêverie agréable et profonde/Occupe son esprit, on a beau lui parler" (*OD*, 40). As he says, a wandering mind is not necessarily an empty one and can be very rich in dreams and fancies. Without his absent-

mindfulness, without his hours of concentration on a faraway world where beauty reigned, could La Fontaine have revived the art of Marot and Rabelais, could he have recaptured the spirit of Greece and Rome? In all his best poetry there is a touch of reverie—now humorous now melancholy—a reflective quality which suggests a dreamer curious to follow his thoughts wherever they might lead him, as long as they did not become boring.

Many of the vagaries of his life—his false starts in various professions, his efforts in genres foreign to his talents, his alternations of enthusiasm and indifference—seem to have arisen from an intense need for variety and change. His genius for comic scenes was the equal of Molière's; yet he never quite succeeded in writing a good full-length play; the "comédie à cent actes divers," as he called his fables, was the only kind that suited his temperament. Of all his works the longest, and the most difficult to write, was *Psyché*, and it sometimes shows signs of his impatience and boredom: "car à la fin on s'ennuie de tout, et des belles choses comme du reste" (*Psyché*, OD, 144). His ennui, although quite mild in comparison with the anguish of a Baudelaire, nevertheless tinged his writings with a certain bitterness and sadness which provide a somber backdrop for many of his fables. A faithful portrait of him (as an elderly man, when his melancholy distractions were more pronounced) has been left by the Abbé Vergier, a young admirer, in a letter to Mme d'Hervart:

Je voudrais bien le voir aussi . . .  
Parler de vers, de vin et d'amoureux souci,  
Former d'un vain projet le plan imaginaire . . .  
Puis tout seul s'écarter comme il fait d'ordinaire,  
Non pour rêver à vous qui rêvez tant à lui,  
Non pour rêver à quelque affaire  
Mais pour varier son ennui.<sup>1</sup>

In reading La Fontaine, the gayest of poets, one must be prepared to catch his muted undertones of despondency and remorse, as he thinks of the world's stupidity or reflects on his own misspent life.

Dread of monotony, lack of stability, perhaps weakness of moral fiber—if this was the source of all his failings it also endowed him with a many-sided poetic personality. As one surveys his life one finds no domineering ambitions, no ardent convictions, not even any prolonged or overwhelming love affairs. Yet no one was more

susceptible to feminine beauty, and he began his philandering at an early age:

A peine la raison vint éclairer mon âme  
 Que je sentis l'ardeur de ma première flamme.  
 Plus d'une passion a depuis dans mon cœur  
 Exercé tous les droits d'un superbe vainqueur. (OD, 644)

His complex relations with women deserve to be studied carefully and can perhaps offer one of the best approaches to an appreciation of his art. Erotically inclined, there is no doubting it, he was led to flirtations with any pretty girl who crossed his path; his taste for voluptuous pleasures can be seen everywhere in his writings. Sometimes he fell deeply in love, for a while, with women who were more beautiful but less easily won, and who inspired the adoration of a slave before some princess or goddess. Even more touching is his intimate but respectful devotion to the gracious ladies, Mme de La Sablière and Mme d'Hervart, who gave him a haven in the last decades of his life. On all these levels, whether teasing the fair sex in his tales or pouring forth his heart in an elegy, whether responding to physical charms or to intellectual ones, he displayed the utmost delicacy and understanding. Unlike most of his contemporaries, La Fontaine was neither coarse nor vapidly ethereal. He expressed his feelings in the truest and most varied love poetry in the three centuries between Ronsard and Baudelaire.

There is no need to repeat the oft-told stories of his amorous adventures—his visit to the bedroom of the "lieutenante-générale" of Château-Thierry, his familiarities with a certain abbess of easy virtue—these incidents made no permanent impression on him, no more than did his marriage. La Fontaine often admitted the fickleness of his affections (Mais quoi! je suis volage en vers comme en amours) and he rightly sensed that this inconstancy was the motivating force which set the erratic pattern of his literary career and led him to undertake and mingle a variety of poetic styles (Ta conduite et tes vers, chez toi tout s'en ressent). These remarks are made in his penetrating introspective poem which he read before the French Academy in 1684, the *Discours à Mme de La Sablière*, where he borrows a phrase from Plato's *Ion* and compares himself to a butterfly, attracted to every flower in the garden of the Muses, and then reproaches himself for trying too many manners and genres.<sup>2</sup> But this fault is the very essence of his genius. The fables

endure because of their infinite variety; they range from pithy anecdotes to long philosophic meditations, from lighthearted comic scenes to grave insights into life's tragic cruelties. And, in a single fable, one will find continual gradations of tone and emphasis, a blending of objective description and personal reaction, a subtle interplay of every style from the most elevated to the most colloquial.

Keenly aware of his shortcomings and powerless to overcome them, La Fontaine at least made no effort to keep them concealed. His atonement for sin was to confess it, in all candor and humility. Many of his friends, and notably Charles Perrault, have commented on his frankness and sincerity, his simplicity and "humilité naturelle": "car il était fort humble sans être dévôt, ni même régulier dans ses mœurs."<sup>3</sup> His utter lack of affectation, which made him so likeable as a man, did not keep him from being a resourceful artist, skillful in using all the tricks of his craft; rather it went to form the calm, clear, disenchanted view of life expressed in all his writings. Perhaps his main source of comedy, as well as his nearest approach to a unified moral attitude, is his exposure of pretense and hypocrisy wherever they occur. This "bonhomme naïf," as he is so often called, was not a child nor a simpleton, but he possessed an instinct for truth and naturalness which enabled him to detect any departure from the normal.

Yet his ridicule of human vanities is not malicious or intended to cause pain. He makes fun of all types of men and women but in a sly, affectionate manner which avoids personalities and which only prudes could find offensive. Just once, when the composer Lulli had betrayed him, he lost his temper and wrote a vehement satire (*Le Florentin*, OD, 611-612) to vent his injured feelings, but he carefully refrained from publishing it and soon began working again with Lulli on friendly terms. Even when people imposed on him or treated him slightly he was submissive and anxious to please. He got married to oblige his father and, according to Perrault, he assumed the post of forest supervisor for this same reason. He would display this docility (along with a good measure of prudent foresight) as he prepared his works for publication, seeking advice from his elders, passing manuscripts to his friends for comment, and carefully feeling out public tastes. Occasionally his easy-going nature (and desire to win applause) would lead him to accept

literary assignments—such as *Le Songe de Vaux* and *Le Quinquina*—for which he had little aptitude or interest. He began his career rather timidly, with modest translations or imitations of Terence and Ovid, and at times almost surrendered to the spell of aristocratic circles which wanted to make of him an entertainer like Voiture. A sweet and gentle soul, he was always open to influence, good or bad, always subject to temptation. Yet, as Giraudoux has shown so well, he survived every temptation and, while seeming to heed advice from every quarter, quietly went his own way. He paid his respects to rules and theories, then blandly disregarded them. Relying on his own sure taste, choosing only what he needed from many models and mentors, he maintained his artistic freedom and created a personal, inimitable form of art. He had more inner strength, more self-assertion, more ambition, than people realized.

The first 30 years of his life reveal one thing very clearly; his extraordinary gift for friendship. In this period, while writing little or nothing, he somehow made a multitude of acquaintances, including some prominent men of letters, who would remain devoted to him all his life. (Only one, Furetière, ever turned against him, and this was in a quarrel where Furetière fought the whole French Academy.) His instability, which made him an impossible husband, gave him the qualities of a delightful friend; he could keep to himself when in a dark or thoughtful mood, then seek out his comrades when his heart was light. People found him warm, gay, sociable, tactful, above all endowed with a certain indefinable charm like that of his fables. What is more surprising is his courageous loyalty—as in his efforts on behalf of Fouquet after the financier's disgrace—and this arose no doubt from a profound sense of dependency or gratitude. La Fontaine *needed* his friends and turned to them for encouragement, for intellectual stimulation, even for a place to live when he ran short of money. Little wonder that this lovable parasite, who was to spend some 20 years as a guest in the household of Mme de La Sablière, keenly realized his obligations and found in the theme of friendship the inspiration for some of his most deeply emotional fables such as *Les Deux Amis* (VIII, 9) and *Les Deux Pigeons* (IX, 2).

All his virtues were mixed ones, and his cultivation of useful contacts was doubtless spurred in part by self-interest and ambition. He had a streak of bourgeois prudence which sometimes failed him



in practical matters (for if he paid his debts scrupulously he also spent his money too freely and indulged a taste for gambling), but which guided his literary activities efficiently and surely. He took advantage of every opportunity to meet the people whose friendship might later prove valuable. Similarly, in composing his poetry, he would write economically, making every effort count and allowing nothing to be wasted. How often we shall see a felicitous phrase or idea occurring first in some letter or occasional piece, then lifted bodily and introduced in a poem intended for publication! La Fontaine's subtle, ever-changing personality was the result of many opposite traits and forces, but he saved the best of himself for his work as an artist: hence the recurrent contrasts between his lazy, irresponsible way of life and his carefully executed literary projects.

As a poet he had high ideals, serious aspirations, and considerable confidence in his own energies and talents. Although he was slow in launching his career he seems to have been aware of his vocation at an early age and to have prepared himself by very extensive readings. If not a profound thinker he was studious, reflective, deeply in love with literature, and sensitive to beauty of every kind. In *Clymène* he will show his affection for each of the nine Muses, in the *Songe de Vaux* he will also court the goddesses of architecture, painting, and gardening. Many of his early works, from *Adonis* to *Psyché*, are set in some lovelier world, some dreamlike Golden Age where peace and beauty reign, evoked in yearning, nostalgic tones. In his *Hymne à la Volupté* he has himself called attention to the wide vistas of pleasure and art and feeling which attracted him:

J'aime le jeu, l'amour, les livres, la musique,  
La ville et la campagne, enfin tout; il n'est rien  
Qui ne me soit souverain bien,  
Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique. (OD, 256)

André Gide has described La Fontaine as "un miracle de culture. Sage comme Montaigne; sensible comme Mozart."<sup>4</sup> The formula fails to do justice to the poet's emotional qualities but it aptly suggests his breadth and delicacy of taste and the many cultural streams which flow together in his art.

## CHAPTER II

# The Student of Ancient Literature

### 1. Terence—*L'Eunuque*.

**L**a Fontaine, like other artists of the classical period in France, had little or no ambition to invent original literary subjects. An accepted method of composition, which he almost invariably followed, was to seek out a well-known poem, story, or drama, preferably from the literature of antiquity or some foreign country, and re-interpret it more or less faithfully so as to please the French reading public. His development as a poet is to be found reflected in his choice of models, the profit he derives from them, the way he transforms them, and finally his increasing freedom in departing from them. All literature lay before him; he could plunder any author he liked, and the more famous the better, of course taking care not to tread on the toes of his own colleagues. His problem (not perfectly solved until he conceived the fables) was one of discovery; he had to find subjects and genres which were widely known but not yet fully exploited, which could be attuned to the demands of readers and critics, and which could provide an effective vehicle for his own poetic talents. In his early publications La Fontaine went to various Latin authors for his materials. The nature of his first major endeavor, an adaptation of Terence's *Eunuchus*, reveals his love for the theater, the boldness of his aspirations (for the play was considered pornographic and had intimidated French dramatists), and also his realization, already, that his genius had a comic vein.

Toward the middle of the seventeenth century Terence enjoyed the reputation of being the best of the ancient authors of comedies. Greek playwrights were not yet fully appreciated and, among the Romans, Terence was rated far above Plautus by nearly all critics (although Plautus had more often served as a source for French comedies). La Fontaine's preference is very clear; he frequently praises Terence and at the same time condemns Plautus as a "plat bouffon" (*OD*, 261, 525), lacking in restraint and propriety. His enthusiasm for Terence may have been awakened by the quarrel between Ménage and d'Aubignac over certain details of Terence's

*Heautontimorumenos*. This dispute had begun in 1640, in a friendly spirit, with an exchange of letters and pamphlets, then had been revived with much bitterness on both sides when Ménage republished these texts in his *Miscellanea* in 1652. Or, if La Fontaine was in touch with the solitaries of Port-Royal, he may have watched with interest Le Maistre de Sacy's French translation of three plays by Terence in 1647. This very successful work, which went through many editions, was intended for use in schools and offered an emended, expurgated version of the Latin comedies. It did not include the *Eunuchus*, for obvious reasons—and indeed there had been no French translation of the play since the one by Baïf, published in 1573—but it may conceivably have given La Fontaine the idea of revising this comedy so as to remove its shocking features.

He knew the works of Terence very well. In the prefaces to his tales of 1666 and his fables of 1668, in *Psyché*, in his *Épître à Huet*, he pays his respects to the Latin playwright, calling him one of his favorite authors and using him as an example to justify his own literary methods. Terence's name kept occurring to him when he sought to defend his technique of imitation, his "style négligé" in the tales, or his "style enjoué" in the fables. In publishing *L'Eunuque* in 1654 he wrote an *Avertissement* to accompany the play, in which he expressed the greatest admiration for his Latin source: for its simple and logical construction, its freshness of plot, its propriety, its lack of excess, its plausibility in the portrayal of characters, its purity of style, its naturalness of dialogue (OD, 261–262). (He avoids mentioning the play's indelicate subject matter and merely reminds the reader, perhaps with a malicious dig at the prudery of his times, that this was Terence's greatest success and delighted both "honnêtes gens" and "people" in ancient Rome.) These remarks of La Fontaine tend to be rather theoretical and misleading—he seems to be showing off his knowledge of Horace's *Ars poetica* and of modern critical jargon—but they do not conceal his intense admiration for the poetic and comic gifts of Terence. He doubtless enjoyed Terence's keen portraiture, his urbanity and lightness of touch, his graceful and quietly humorous style, his touches of sentimentality. He had in common with his Roman predecessor a flair for gentle satire and perhaps a certain lack of theatrical sense.

It was probably around 1651 or 1652, or even earlier, that La Fontaine began working on his play. His *Avertissement* evokes mem-

ories of France emerging from the Fronde (nous vivons dans un siècle et dans un pays où l'autorité n'est point respectée) and indicates that he had lain his project aside, unfinished, until certain unnamed friends—probably belonging to the group of the Table Ronde—urged him to complete it and give it to the public. He also thanks other persons “dont le mérite est universellement honoré”—possibly certain elder men of letters such as Patru or Conrart—for correcting his manuscript.<sup>1</sup> Thus there seem to have been at least two stages in the writing of *L'Eunuque*, first a period of ardent but unsatisfying work, while the author dreamed of winning fame by adapting Terence to the Paris stage, then a period of renewed activity under pressure from some of his friends. There is no evidence to show whether or not La Fontaine's play was performed, and if it was it passed unnoticed. In any case, when he published it in the summer of 1654, he was fully aware of its weaknesses and spoke of it very modestly and apologetically as a “médiocre copie d'un excellent original.” These vicissitudes in the composition of the comedy will be reflected in the discordant manners in which La Fontaine conceives and treats his subject.

Terence's comedy takes place on a street in Athens, outside the house of a prostitute, Thaïs. Her favors are sought by a young man of good family, Phaedria (to give his name its English form), and a braggart soldier, Thraso. Each suitor has a scheming helper to further his plans: a devoted but impertinent slave, Parmeno, and a flattering parasite, Gnatho. The rivals try to outdo one another in offering gifts to her; Thraso donates a beautiful slave-girl, Pamphila, and Phaedria purchases a eunuch for her. But Phaedria has a younger brother, Chaerea, who catches a glimpse of Pamphila, falls in love with her, and contrives to exchange costumes with the eunuch so that he can gain admission to Thaïs's house. Once inside, we are told, the supposed eunuch proceeds to ravish Pamphila. But everything turns out well in the end when Pamphila is proved to be freeborn, hence able to marry Chaerea, and when Phaedria obtains his father's permission to marry Thaïs. Even the foolish soldier is mollified by a promise that he can help entertain Thaïs (and foot the bill). Such is Terence's plot, stripped to its essentials, omitting many minor complications and a host of secondary characters, omitting, also, the humorous elements which make the play so enjoyable. There is no denying that the *Eunuchus* is rather

confused, long drawn-out, and full of startling coincidences, but these faults (for a modern reader) are easily overlooked; the play is fundamentally a comedy of situations and presents a number of delightful comic scenes. The buffoonery of Thraso and Gnatho, their encounters with the scoffing Parmeno, the scene where the true eunuch (a withered old man) is accused of a crime he could not possibly have committed, the efforts of Thraso and his army of kitchen boys to besiege Thaïs house—all this has a gayety, a fanciful verve, which few playwrights have surpassed and which, unfortunately, had to be sacrificed if the comedy was to be adapted to the stage in seventeenth-century France.

La Fontaine was obliged, at the outset, to transform Terence's plot and characters so as to remove any suggestion of corruption or coarseness. He avoided the subjects of prostitution and rape and, in keeping with the formulas of Corneille and other contemporary dramatists, he wrote a comedy about two pairs of young lovers. Thaïs has become a poor but virtuous widow, hence acceptable as a bride for Phaedria, with whom she is in love. In encouraging Thraso she has only the purest of motives: to rescue her adopted sister, Pamphila, from serfdom and to restore her to her parents. As for Pamphila (who in the Latin play did not have a speaking part), she is now a second heroine and is wooed legitimately, gallantly, by an adoring Chaerea. But in spite of these drastic innovations La Fontaine attempted, during most of the first three acts, to remain quite faithful to the text of Terence, seldom translating literally yet preserving many details and incidents and maintaining a parallel, scene by scene development of the plot. This method involved him in several serious inconsistencies and improbabilities. If Thaïs is a respectable widow why should Parmeno treat her almost as a courtesan and accuse her of lying? And, since Chaerea's intentions are honorable, why should he borrow the eunuch's costume in order to make the acquaintance of Pamphila and declare his love? Furthermore, in the passages where he tried to follow Terence closely, La Fontaine was apparently hampered by the rules and proprieties of his century and produced a diluted version far inferior to the original. Seventeenth-century commentators (Brienne, Palaprat) attributed the failure of his play to the fact that he showed too much respect for his source; he should have revised the play more freely, discarding everything which clashed with contemporary tastes.<sup>2</sup>

But these criticisms are not entirely justified. La Fontaine struggles for almost three acts to reproduce Terence while toning down his indecency, only occasionally allowing himself to introduce new materials of his own invention. His most notable additions are the amusing scene (I, v) where Phaedria, torn between love for Thaïs and obedience to her wishes, can barely keep his promise to stay away from her house, and a colorful prolongation of Gnatho's discourse (II, i) on the joys of being a parasite. Then, toward the end of the third act, La Fontaine apparently found his task too difficult and abandoned it, returning to it later in a new frame of mind. In the fourth and fifth acts he throws Terence overboard and borrows only two scenes from him (IV, v and V, v); everything else is newly conceived and freshly written. Little wonder that the play does not develop logically from beginning to end. In the opening scenes Thaïs retains a little of the selfish, brazen attitude of the ancient *meretrix*, but in the latter half of the play she is sweet, virtuous, and even rather prim. Similarly, the fears expressed for the wrath of Demea, father of Phaedria and Chaerea, seem ridiculous when he finally makes his appearance at the close of the third act, for he turns out to be very mellow and indulgent. La Fontaine's play is an uneven, hybrid work, partially a pale adaptation of Terence and partially an original comedy whose spirit comes very close to Molière.

When he forgets his model La Fontaine displays considerable talent for creating lively characters and scenes. The seduction episode, which of course Terence described as taking place offstage, is skillfully exploited and becomes the high point of the play (IV, i). When Chaerea (disguised as the eunuch) makes love to Pamphila and begs her to marry him, she is at first shocked at his boldness, then angry and suspicious, then overcome with confusion as she reluctantly confesses her admiration and affection for him; the subtlety and range of her emotions give the scene a charm suggestive of Marivaux. Another delightful flirtation, this one earthy and farcical (IV, viii), takes place between Pythias (Thaïs's excitable servant), and Chremes (Pamphila's brother), a character whom Terence had scarcely bothered to delineate. La Fontaine makes Chremes a gay old blade, rich, ribald, and good-natured, and transforms Pythias into a middle-aged chatterbox, rather motherly but still attractive and very competent in repulsing the familiarities of

her admirer. The swaggering captain and the professional flatterer are stock characters, both on the Roman stage and in the comedy of seventeenth-century France, and even Parmeno, the sarcastic slave, has many predecessors, but La Fontaine succeeds fairly well in bringing their jesting up to date and in giving them an air of individuality. But perhaps his best effort is the character of Demea. In the Latin play (where he is an unnamed *senex*) he appears very briefly, as a disagreeable skinflint who wants to put an end to his son's extravagance. But in *L'Eunuque* he has become a generous and kindly old man, eager to put his affairs in order and see his sons happily married, and longing pathetically for the attentions of daughters and grandchildren. As Parmeno describes him, with a grain of malice (V, iii):

... Que, pour courir à tout n'étant plus assez vert,  
Il se veut désormais tenir clos et couvert;  
Caresser, les pieds chauds, quelque bru qui lui plaise;  
Conter son jeune temps; banqueter à son aise . . .

One wonders whether La Fontaine may not have had his own father in mind as he sketched this affectionate portrait. Much observation of manners, much insight into human character, and a graceful yet incisive penchant for mocking mankind's frailties, give life and charm to the latter pages of the comedy. Although still lacking in experience and assurance, the author of the fables is clearly to be recognized.

The poetry of *L'Eunuque* also holds great promise for the future. It should be noted that this is the lengthiest work in verse, amounting to over 1800 lines, by a poet who will always declare that he has no talent for long compositions. One frequently gains the impression that he found his task tiresome or uninspiring, particularly in the laborious expository passages in the first act, where he was obliged to explain the complicated past history of Thaïs and Pamphila. His awareness of the sententious style of Corneille and of the sentimental language of the salons is sometimes all too obvious, as in this rather artificial discussion of Phaedria's attitude toward Thaïs:

*Phaedria*

C'est à tort que des miens j'allègue le pouvoir,  
Et je cède au dépit bien plus qu'à mon devoir.

*Parmeno*

Vous cédez à l'amour plus qu'à votre colère;  
 Ce courroux implacable en soupirs dégénère;  
 Vous faisiez tantôt peur, et vous faites pitié.  
 Votre cœur, sans mentir, est de bonne amitié;  
 Ce qu'il a su chérir, rarement il l'abhorre:  
 Il adorait ses fers, il les respecte encore . . . . (I, i)

Yet it was perhaps these same influences that helped make of La Fontaine a poet capable of expressing love's tenderness and impelling force. Some of the lines spoken by Pamphila (Ah! dieux! quelles douceurs où mon âme se noie!—IV, i) or by Phaedria (Si je veille au plus fort de l'ombre et du silence,—IV, vi) have a soft, voluptuous quality which anticipates the eloquent love scenes of *Adonis*. Parmeno's words in praise of Pamphila (J'estime sa beauté, mais j'admire sa grâce—V, iv) are La Fontaine's first expression of a distinction between grace and beauty which will recur in *Adonis*, then become an important theme in *Psyché* and his esthetic ideal for women and poetry alike. And there is at least one line in *L'Eunuque* (Je sais qu'elle est perfide; et je l'aime, et je meurs,—I, i), possibly derived from the famous "Odi et amo" of Catullus (LXXXV), whose bitter vehemence would not be out of place in a tragedy by Racine. One of the rewards of studying La Fontaine's early works is the discovery that, before arriving at his tales and fables—where the fair sex is treated jokingly and somewhat cynically—he took love very seriously and found in it the inspiration for much of his best poetry.

The tales and fables are also heralded in *L'Eunuque*, in many bits of comic dialogue and racy narrative which reveal the abilities of a born storyteller. Sometimes he makes use of humorous details offered by Terence but more often he borrows only the basic theme or situation as a starting point for his own flights of fancy. A close comparison of Gnatho's soliloquy (II, i) with the Latin original (lines 232–269) would show that La Fontaine omits certain picturesque elements, such as Gnatho's smug allusion to the compliments offered him by fishermen and food vendors (lines 256–259), but introduces other adornments which are equally vivid and amusing. When Gnatho reports the words of a down-and-out friend who could not bring himself to be a subservient flatterer, he merely says, in the Latin text: "At ego, infelix, neque ridiculus esse neque plagas



pati/possum." But the French poet embroiders on this simple statement and conjures up a colorful picture of the parasite's duties as a go-between in his master's love affairs:

Je ne saurais souffrir ni de coup, ni d'injure;  
Et, lorsque j'ai d'un bras senti la pesanteur,  
Je ne suis point ingrat envers mon bienfaiteur.  
D'ailleurs faire l'agent, et d'amour s'entremettre,  
Couler dans une main le présent et la lettre,  
Préparer les logis, faire le compliment;  
Quand Monsieur est entré, sortir adroitement,  
Avoir soin que toujours la porte soit fermée,  
Et manger, comme on dit, son pain à la fumée;  
C'est ce que je ne puis, ni ne veux pratiquer. (*OD*, 280)

This animated, familiar style occurs in the speeches of all the slaves and servants and affords many pleasant contrasts to the more polite language of their superiors. When Chremes protests his love for Pythias with exaggerated gallantry (*Tu veux donc qu'en t'aimant je souffre le trépas?*—IV, viii), her reply quickly brings him down to earth:

Assez dans votre sexe on se meurt de parole;  
Je crois que vous allez chacun en même école,  
Rien qu'un même discours ne vous sert sur ce point.  
Tandis qu'ils sont vermeils et remplis d'embonpoint,  
Messieurs sèchent sur pied, du moins à ce qu'ils disent;  
En avons-nous pitié, les galants nous méprisent.

The poetry of *L'Eunuque* lacks the crystalline brilliance and the rich variety which La Fontaine will achieve some years later but it has, already, his delicate touch, an air of spontaneity, a blending of emotion and humor, which make the play well worth reading.

*L'Eunuque* has often been criticized very severely. But its evident faults as a dramatic whole are counterbalanced by a multitude of refreshing passages and scenes. Above all it is interesting for what it discloses of La Fontaine's artistic inclinations and methods. The creative process employed in *L'Eunuque* will be repeated in nearly all his major compositions, including the fables and tales; he will go to famous old books and find material which is often crude or bald, then weave it freely into something personal, amusingly graceful, elegant, and respectable. *L'Eunuque* marks an auspicious beginning for his career. La Fontaine has started out well, with a

solid study of an ancient literary work—which will lead him quite naturally to *Adonis*—has learned a great deal concerning his talents and his limitations, and has already explored the technique of imitation which will serve him so well in the years to come.

## 2. *Ovid—Adonis.*

The publication of *L'Eunuque* was greeted with indifference, a fact which may have turned La Fontaine temporarily away from literature, or, at least, may have shown him the wisdom of withholding his works until they could be printed under more favorable auspices. It was not until around 1657 that he began writing actively again (or if there were any earlier compositions, they have been lost), and he waited until 1664 before venturing to publish his next book. Not that he led an idle life. His business letters to Jacques Jannart—seven of them in the period from 1654 to 1659, and one more dating from 1662—show that he had much to occupy his time, and not merely his official functions at Château-Thierry. He was beset with financial difficulties and had to sell certain pieces of property, he made a number of journeys to Paris and at least two prolonged visits with Maucroix in Rheims; in the spring of 1658 his father's death left him heir to substantial debts and involved him in a lawsuit with his brother. If he was to devote himself to poetry he would have to obtain the assistance of a wealthy or powerful patron. Fate played into his hands and, probably in 1657, brought him to the attention of Nicolas Fouquet. *L'Eunuque* may have provided him with the necessary credentials but he owed his good fortune mainly to his relatives and friends: to his wife's uncle, Jannart, a close associate of Fouquet in legal and legislative matters, and to Paul Pellisson, who served the financier as a sort of confidential secretary in his dealings with writers and artists.

As "surintendant des finances" during the ministry of Mazarin, Fouquet manipulated public funds so skillfully that he amassed a huge private fortune. His political ambitions were furthered by prodigal generosity, by a gift for showmanship, and by a keen interest in the fine arts. Poets and painters gathered around him, along with men and women of the aristocracy, forming a court more royal than the king's. He entertained on a dazzling scale, first in

Paris and at his Saint-Mandé estate, then eventually at his magnificent chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte, which he began building toward 1656, employing Le Vau as his architect, Le Brun as his decorator, and Le Nôtre as his gardener. During "the Vaux period," *i.e.* from about 1657 to the moment of Fouquet's disgrace in 1661, La Fontaine made frequent appearances in the finance minister's circle and became almost an official poet, well rewarded for his services.

His first work in honor of his benefactor was *Adonis*, a poem relating a tragic love story from ancient mythology. The presentation copy of *Adonis*—for which Fouquet doubtless paid the bills—is a parchment manuscript, beautifully inscribed and illustrated, which was offered to him in the summer of 1658. La Fontaine praises his patron reverently in a preliminary letter of dedication and again in a 12-line tribute incorporated in the poem itself. But in spite of this fanfare it is not at all certain that *Adonis* was commissioned by Fouquet or even written with him in mind; its composition or at least its maturation seems to reach back over a period of several years. The author will explain this, in 1669, when he finally releases his poem for publication:

Il y a longtemps que cet ouvrage est composé; et peut-être n'en est-il pas moins digne de voir la lumière. Quand j'en conçus le dessein, j'avais plus d'imagination que je n'en ai aujourd'hui. Je m'étais toute ma vie exercé en ce genre de poésie que nous nommons héroïque: c'est assurément le plus beau de tous, le plus fleuri, le plus susceptible d'ornements et de ces figures nobles et hardies qui font une langue à part, une langue assez charmante pour mériter qu'on l'appelle la langue des dieux. Le fonds que j'en avais fait, soit par la lecture des anciens, soit par celle de quelques-uns de nos modernes, s'est presque entièrement consumé dans l'embellissement de ce poème, bien que l'ouvrage soit court, et qu'à proprement parler il ne mérite que le nom d'idylle . . . (OD, 1)

These words must be weighed very carefully if one is to appreciate the nature of La Fontaine's poem and the way in which it was conceived. Its style is "héroïque," *i.e.* epic, but not the austere Homeric manner appropriate for describing feats of warfare. La Fontaine makes this clear in the opening lines of his poem: "Ces sujets sont trop hauts, et je manque de voix!" Rather it is a less lofty epic style, Alexandrines which are "flowery" and richly adorned, reminiscent of Ovid, or of certain scenes in Virgil, or of Ariosto, suitable for singing the loves of gods and heroes and the

beauties of nature. A tale of human and divine passion in a woodland atmosphere, that is the subject announced in *Adonis*:

C'est parmi les forêts qu'a vécu mon héros;  
C'est dans les bois qu'Amour a troublé son repos.  
Ma Muse en sa faveur de myrte s'est parée;  
J'ai voulu célébrer l'amant de Cythérée . . . (OD, 3)

By virtue of its ornate style, its serious subject, and its substantial length (for it runs to over 600 lines, in spite of the author's apology for its brevity), *Adonis* belongs to a real but loosely defined genre, the "poème," to which La Fontaine returned, each time with a slightly different approach, in *Saint-Malc*, in *Le Quinquina*, in *Les Filles de Minée*, in *Philémon et Baucis*. Finally (and this point has always been misunderstood), *Adonis* was the poet's first effort in a heroic vein. When he says "je m'étais toute ma vie exercé" he does not mean that he had written epic poetry, but rather that he had studied it and gained a wide familiarity with it. The context (Le fonds que j'en avais fait . . .) refers clearly to his extensive *readings*, to his stored-up knowledge, which he utilized in the embellishment of his poem. Unlike *L'Eunuque*, a fairly straightforward adaptation of a single comedy, *Adonis* is the fruit of a long preoccupation with many ancient and modern authors. Furthermore it is a spontaneous, inspired work, written when the author's imaginative faculties were strongest. It has no practical purpose, notwithstanding the dedication to Fouquet, but is motivated only by love for the ancient world, by love for serious literature, by a desire to create something beautiful in the "language of the gods."

If various sources or memories are to be found reflected in *Adonis*, the central story is borrowed, more or less intact, from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. La Fontaine had many reasons for loving Ovid. As a personality the Roman poet was very much a kindred soul, with his marital instability, his pursuit of pleasure, his lascivious tendencies, his disfavor in the eyes of the emperor. The petulant spirit of the *Amores* can be felt in some of La Fontaine's elegies and the cynical, libertine attitude of the *Ars amatoria* will be paralleled in his more erotic tales. In the writings of Ovid La Fontaine must have admired the easy lucidity of presentation, the slightly artificial and rhetorical style, the conceits and neatly turned phrases, above all the technique of a superb storyteller. He had a particular predilec-

tion for the *Metamorphoses*, a book which in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had enjoyed enormous prestige and had exerted an incalculable influence on every European literature. The delightful narratives of the *Metamorphoses* offered a treasury of plots and themes laid in a twice-removed antiquity, distant from Ovid himself, an opulent dream world which was more Greek than Roman, peopled by valiant heroes and beautiful goddesses. Almost an encyclopedia of ancient myths, in their most accepted and most accessible form, the *Metamorphoses* were a source of constant inspiration to painters, poets, and sculptors, and to no one more than La Fontaine. He drew upon the *Metamorphoses* for part of the material in *Le Songe de Vaux*, for two opera librettos (*Daphné* and *Galatée*), for most of *Les Filles de Minée*, for *Philémon et Baucis*, and in his other works frequently recalled expressions or passages from Ovid which had made a lasting impression on his mind.<sup>1</sup> Like Racine, he probably knew by heart many of the famous scenes in Ovid's work. In his second letter to La Fontaine written from Uzès, Racine twice alluded indirectly to incidents in the *Metamorphoses*, knowing very well that his friend would understand him.<sup>2</sup> Curiously enough, La Fontaine's only discussion of Ovid seeks to praise him for some of his faults: the strained transitions and lack of continuity in the *Metamorphoses* (OD, 763). His own abhorrence for massive creative efforts, his own tendency to write short pieces which have great variety but no connecting link, made him feel sympathetic to an author who experienced the same difficulties. This failure to achieve homogeneity will be apparent even in *Adonis*, his most sustained lyrical composition.

The story of Venus and Adonis, as related by Ovid (X, 519-559, 705-739), is a very minor one, less than 80 lines long, and is broken in the middle so as to serve as framework for a much longer episode, Atalanta's race and transformation into a lion. Venus happens to receive a scratch from one of Cupid's arrows and finds herself in love with a mortal of great beauty, young Adonis. She becomes a huntress and joins him in his pastimes but expresses great fear of savage beasts such as boars and lions, and, by way of explanation, tells what happened to Atalanta and her lover. Then she goes away for a while, after again warning Adonis to avoid hunting dangerous game. But he ignores her advice, comes upon the trail of a wild boar, pursues it, and is killed. Venus returns, griefstricken, and as a

monument to her love changes the blood of Adonis into a flower, the anemone. In this brief narrative Ovid stresses two main themes, the perils of hunting (which La Fontaine will minimize) and the final metamorphosis (which he will omit entirely). Indeed the French poem follows Book X of the *Metamorphoses* only in the basic facts of the story and in a few picturesque details which are rather closely imitated: a reflection on the swift passage of time (lines 519-520), Venus's disregard of her duties as a goddess (529-532), her resting beside Adonis on a grassy couch (555-559), her chariot riding through the air (716-717). Although La Fontaine had the Latin text close at hand he showed great independence in using it.

He begins his poem with a formal announcement of his subject, in the epic manner, and a warm dedication (to Fouquet in the manuscript of 1658, to an unidentified Aminte in the printed version of 1669), then evokes a woodland scene in the Idalian mountains, home of the young huntsman, Adonis. He is so handsome that his fame spreads throughout the world and causes Venus to fall desperately in love with him. When she joins him he soon surrenders to the power of her beauty, and they pass many happy, passionate hours together, making love, strolling beside secluded brooks, or dancing in the moonlight. But divine business calls Venus away and, after urging Adonis to remain at a safe distance both from wild animals and from the unworthy charms of the "nymphes de ces bois," she and her lover exchange a tearful farewell. Left alone, Adonis is overcome with despair and at last turns to hunting to keep his mind occupied.

At this point La Fontaine, "capitaine des chasses" at Château-Thierry and a poet intent on composing a miniature epic, introduces a long and elaborate hunting scene. Perhaps the boar mentioned by Ovid reminded him of another boar hunt in the same author or perhaps the intrusion of the Atalanta story led him to Ovid's other Atalanta, beloved of Meleager. In any event La Fontaine goes to the boar chase in Calydon (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 281-424) and this time imitates his source rather closely, substituting Adonis for Meleager and a new character, Aréthuse (possibly suggested by Ovid's Arethusa in Book V), for Atalanta. The description of the boar and its damage to herds and crops, the enumeration of the huntsmen (many of whom are given new names), the beauty and prowess of

Aréthuse, the pursuit of the boar, the manner in which several hunters die—all this comes from Ovid. But La Fontaine seldom translates word by word, he changes many small details, and he makes several important innovations. Although the Latin text speaks of dogs only in passing he names and describes several of them and gives them a part in the action; here he seems to have in mind two other hunting scenes in the *Metamorphoses*, Actaeon killed by his own hounds (III, 206–252) and Lealaps, the dog of Cephalus and Procris, giving chase to a monster (VII, 762–793). Also he has Adonis ride a magnificent horse, this time profiting from a bit of folklore in Virgil's *Georgics* (III, 275). In an effort to tie together his two stories he introduces some nymphs who protect Adonis, using a magic spell to keep him away from the fray, and a decree of destiny which causes their schemes to fail. And, as Adonis attacks the boar he utters a prayer to Venus to give him strength. At the end of this episode La Fontaine of course departs from his source; Meleager triumphs over the monster and lives but Adonis has to die.

The closing section of the poem has no counterpart in Ovid. Venus returns, weeps bitterly, reflects on the cruelty of fate, and pours out her broken heart in a vehement and intensely pathetic monologue which makes the winds sigh and the rocks shed tears. As she gives dead Adonis a final kiss the sun turns away and night falls around her. This lamentation scene is inspired, but perhaps indirectly, by the Greek bucolic poets: the threnodies on the death of Adonis by Theocritus and Bion.

Thus, while Ovid occupies a leading place in *Adonis*, he is accompanied by a host of other ancient writers whose influence La Fontaine himself acknowledges in a passage of invocation:

Grands et nobles esprits, chantres incomparables,  
Mêlez parmi ces sons vos accords admirables . . .  
Et que, m'étant formé sur vos savantes mains,  
Ces vers puissent passer aux derniers des humains! (OD, 5)

The setting which he adopts (aux monts Idaliens), may be an echo of an elegy by Propertius, which refers to the huntsman's death on the Idalian heights (II, xiii, 53–54), or of a line in the *Aeneid* (X, 51–52) where Virgil mentions Idalia as a part of Venus's domain. Recollections of Virgil, only a few of which have been noted by editors of La Fontaine, are enmeshed in every part of *Adonis* and

give the poem much of its richness of texture. The poet is particularly indebted to Book IV of the *Aeneid* and at times patterns the misfortunes of Venus on those of Dido. He is mindful of Virgil's description of Fame or Rumor, a few details in the Carthaginian hunting scene, above all of Dido's emotions when faced with the impending departure of Aeneas. Her violent outbursts and her humiliated pleas seem to shape the dramatic structure of Venus's lamentation, giving the goddess of love the air of a queen whose favors have been scorned. In their despair the two heroines make almost the same entreaty, for just a little more time: "Tempus inane peto, requiem spatiumque furori" (line 433), or in La Fontaine's words, "souffrez que mon amant/De son triste départ me console un moment" (*OD*, 16).

The readings which give color to *Adonis* cannot be precisely identified; too many rays are intermingled, too many ancient authors are filtered through the light of "quelques-uns de nos modernes." Was La Fontaine conscious of his obligation to Theocritus and Bion or was he simply guided by imitations of their dirges in the poetry of the French Renaissance? There is little doubt that he knew the *Élégie* on the death of Adonis by Mellin de Saint-Gelais, for he has mentioned Saint-Gelais, along with Marot, as one of his favorite sixteenth-century poets.<sup>3</sup> This elegy seems to be echoed in certain features of his lamentation scene: Venus's desire to die in place of Adonis, her evocation of the underworld, the sympathetic reaction of nature to her appeal, and the shadows of night which bring the poem to a close. Yet some of these details may have been inspired by another work which makes use of Theocritus and Bion, the *Adonis* of Ronsard,<sup>4</sup> with which La Fontaine also seems to have been familiar. Ronsard's poem is very different in conception from the one by La Fontaine but occasionally it offers striking similarities, for example in the description (lines 51-60) of the lovers spending blissful hours together. Ronsard follows Ovid's account of the legend in Book X of the *Metamorphoses* and, like La Fontaine, he turns to Book VIII for a description of the boar (lines 168, 183-188). His treatment of the subject may well have suggested to La Fontaine the juxtaposition of two themes from Ovid, the love story of Adonis and Meleager's boar hunt. Finally, another of Ronsard's poems on hunting, his *Songe*,<sup>5</sup> seems to be echoed in the landscape, especially



the dense thickets and muddy pools, where La Fontaine's boar makes his home.

A less remote predecessor of La Fontaine is the Italian poet Marino, known in France as "le chevalier Marin," whose *Adone* was published in Paris, with great success, in 1623. The poem continued to be held in esteem through the heyday of French "préciosité" and even into the sixteen-sixties; the two partial translations of it which appeared in 1662 and 1667 may perhaps have prompted La Fontaine to revise his *Adonis* for publication. There has been some doubt whether he could read Italian with ease and whether he really borrowed anything from Marino's vast meanderings. The Italian poem runs to some 45,000 lines and has found few investigators patient enough to study it. Lugli has noted an isolated resemblance in the lines where Venus catches her first glimpse of Adonis (Canto III, stanza 68):

Trova colà sul margine del fonte  
Adon, che'n braccio a'fior s'adagia e dorme.

—which comes fairly close to these lines:

Elle trouve Adonis près des bords d'un ruisseau;  
Couché sur des gazons, il rêve au bruit de l'eau. (*OD*, 4)

The fact is that, among the countless adventures, love stories, enchantments, and interpolated stories of the *Adone*, La Fontaine could have found a richly romanticized version of all the Ovidian material which he exploits in his poem. Over 50 stanzas are devoted to a hunting scene (XVIII, 46-101) in which Adonis wounds a wild boar and is himself wounded, and soon after (141-168) Venus arrives and laments over the body of her expiring lover. La Fontaine may or may not have read these pages of the *Adone* but it seems certain that he knew the poem well enough to absorb something of its spirit. His rather artificial style—with its rhetorical devices, its labored epic comparisons, its abuse of precious terms like "charmes" and "appas"—and above all his exalted conception of love and beauty in a dreamy bucolic setting suggest that Marino (and perhaps Honoré d'Urfé) helped to form his vision of the mythological world. The *Adone*, Canto III in particular, unfolds in an atmosphere of langorous lushness, of voluptuous sighs, where love and nature

are equally blissful, the same atmosphere which La Fontaine creates so successfully in *Adonis*.

All these readings, and doubtless others too, weighed on his memory as he composed his poem. They did not serve as sources, except in the case of Ovid, but rather as a cultural heritage, an awareness of literary manners and traditions, which gave his imagination a wide range of materials to work with. This awareness must be recognized if the poem is to be properly appreciated. *Adonis* is not merely a classical and calculated imitation of an ancient poet, not merely a piece of intoxicated writing reminiscent of the Renaissance, not merely a manifestation of Marinism attuned to the refined taste of French salons, but an orchestration where many poetic voices unite in harmony. If (to modern ears) the poem seems over-long, overerudite or overcharged with ornament, if the hunting episode seems slightly out of tune with the idyllic melodies which precede it or the tragic chords which follow, if certain lines seem prosy or certain transitions awkward, these are minor faults and probably unavoidable in such a complicated undertaking. They do not prevent *Adonis* from being a delightful poem in its total impression, a poem where deep personal feelings are set to music in richly vibrant tones.

*Adonis* has suffered comparative neglect in the hands of critics and scholars, except for La Harpe<sup>6</sup> at the end of the eighteenth century and Paul Valéry in the twentieth. The latter, a most perceptive and exacting poet, wrote in 1921 a lucid, eloquent appreciation of *Adonis* which has restored it to a place of eminence among La Fontaine's works. If Valéry paid little attention to the literary recollections distilled throughout the poem he rightly sensed La Fontaine's ardent, patient craftsmanship in a difficult medium and his tireless efforts to achieve an air of graceful fluidity:

Prenons garde que la nonchalance, ici, est savante;  
la mollesse, étudiée; la facilité, le comble de l'art.  
Quant à la naïveté, elle est nécessairement hors de  
cause: l'art et la pureté si soutenus excluent à mon  
regard toute paresse et toute bonhomie.<sup>7</sup>

To the penetrating observations of Valéry and the excellent recent study by Lugli—both of which should be read by every admirer of La Fontaine—only a few brief remarks need be added here.

Not enough has been said concerning the irreality of *Adonis*.

The poet proceeds slowly, embroiders his subject with many colorful details, reports the appearance and conversation of his characters, yet continually avoids facts which are concrete or sharply visualized. His elevated manner and his tendency to use general rather than specific terms, give the poem an aura of vagueness, a softness of focus which is very much in keeping with its subdued musicality. Nothing could be more indefinite than these lines, with their flavor of Petrarch, which somehow suggest the beauty of the goddess heroine:

Rien ne manque à Vénus, ni les lis, ni les roses,  
Ni le mélange exquis des plus aimables choses,  
Ni ce charme secret dont l'œil est enchanté,  
Ni la grâce plus belle encor que la beauté. (OD, 4)

Venus and her lover, who is no less ethereal, share their passionate embraces in a balmy woodland whose hazy outlines suggest a fleeting dream. Even when they are happiest they feel a sense of illusion, a melancholy premonition that they are doomed to a speedy and cruel awakening. This tragic theme, the brief span of mortal life and love, pervades the poem from beginning to end, and goes far to unify its disparate elements. Long before Venus's bitter soliloquy on the death of Adonis the theme is sounded in a description of their hours together,

Jours devenus moments, moments filés de soie,  
Agréables soupirs, pleurs enfants de la joie, (OD, 6)

in a Lamartinian complaint on the swift passage of time,

Voyez, disait Vénus, ces ruisseaux et leur course;  
Ainsi jamais le temps ne remonte à sa source, (OD, 6)

in the spell cast over Adonis by guardian nymphs, then broken by an inexorable destiny:

Les Nymphes, de qui l'œil voit les choses futures,  
L'avaient fait égarer en des routes obscures.  
Le son des cors se perd par un charme inconnu;  
C'est en vain que leur bruit à ses sens est venu . . .  
Mais les Nymphes ont beau s'opposer aux destins,  
Contre un ordre fatal tous leurs charmes sont vains. (OD, 13)

This feeling of mystery and enchantment, this poetry of sensuous and evanescent dreams, reveals a La Fontaine very different from

the later teller of tales and fables. *Adonis* has a youthful lyricism and an idealistic vision of beauty which were perhaps out of step with contemporary literary taste. They will remain strong in certain minor or unsuccessful pieces, such as the *Le Songe de Vaux* and *Clymène*, to be almost lost in the tales, then only partially recaptured in the fables, in those magical lines and passages where realism suddenly gives way to some spacious vista of an imaginary world.

Yet the future La Fontaine can also be seen in *Adonis*, for the poem has many overtones of intensely personal emotion. In still another echo of the dominant theme the poet reflects sadly on the farewell kisses of his hero and heroine:

O vous, tristes plaisirs où leur âme se noie,  
Vains et derniers efforts d'une imparfaite joie,  
Moments pour qui le sort rend leurs vœux superflus,  
Délicieux moments, vous ne reviendrez plus! (*OD*, 7)

Delicious moments, but fragile and soon to slip away forever, they are conjured up in lines which sigh with tenderness and compassion. Here as in the fables, where he will sympathize with weak, unfortunate creatures, his own feelings keep coming to the surface, merged with those of his characters. And sometimes he intervenes quite openly, comparing Venus to his own Aminte, stating his poetic aspirations, or noting his reaction to the sad events he must relate: "Que n'en ai-je oublié les funestes moments!/Pourquoi n'ont pas péri ces tristes monuments?" (*OD*, 14). But La Fontaine could not remain forever serious and he was quick to see the humorous aspects of even the most tragic situation. He could not resist making fun of Venus, and humanizing her, suggesting that she was jealous of the forest nymphs and easily irritated by her attendants' inept beauty treatments: "Rien ne lui semble bien; les Grâces ont beau faire" (*OD*, 4). *Adonis* is enlivened by many small comic touches, particularly in the boar hunt which, far from being dull and monotonous (as some critics have implied), relaxes the tension of the reader and lends brilliance and vigor to a poem which came close to being too hushed and sweet. The names given to some of the huntsmen are enumerated with amusing effect (Lycaste, Palémon, Glauque, Hilus, Amilcar) and there is a farcical incident where a certain Nisus takes refuge in a tree, only to tumble out when the boar cuts down the tree with its tusk. The boar comes from Ovid

and is described rather academically but certain other animals are characterized with the penetrating eye for essentials and the precise brushwork which La Fontaine will demonstrate in his fables: "Les cerfs, au moindre bruit à se sauver si prompts, / Les timides troupeaux des daims aux larges fronts" (*OD*, 10). Throughout the early sections of the poem, and most of all in the hunting scene, one catches glimpses of the poet's personality, of a heart quickly moved to tears or laughter, of a sentimentalist who doubles as a satirist, of an earnest dreamer who can observe life accurately and loves to tell an entertaining story.

But soon after the death of Adonis the poet withdraws and leaves the stage to Venus, whose impassioned lamentation brings the poem to a solemn close. Her long speech (46 lines in the text of 1658, 38 lines in the revision of 1669) has a dramatic pattern and moves through a wide range of tragic emotions. Her first exclamations (perhaps inspired by the words of Ariadne in Catullus, LXIV, 132 ff.) are reproachful but tinged with self-pity: "Mon amour n'a donc pu te faire aimer la vie! / Tu me quittes, cruel!" (*OD*, 16). She begs Adonis to open his eyes but soon tries to resign herself to the fact of his death: "Une éternelle nuit l'oblige à me quitter; / Mes pleurs ni mes soupirs ne peuvent l'arreter." Then, wishing that she could follow him to the realm of departed souls, she decries her own immortality and belittles her beauty which is powerless to conquer death. She addresses a plea to the gods of the underworld to let Adonis live a little longer, but all in vain (Je demande un moment, et ne puis l'obtenir); then grows increasingly bitter and, as a desperate resort, protests that she will seek revenge: "Quoi! vous me refusez un présent si léger? / Cruels, souvenez-vous qu'Amour m'en peut venger." Since the gods are deaf she turns to the groves and grottoes around her and implores that they restore her lover to life, accusing them of betraying a sacred trust:

Lieux amis du repos, demeures solitaires,  
Qui d'un trésor si rare étiez dépositaires,  
Déserts, rendez-le moi: deviez-vous avec lui  
Nourrir chez vous le monstre auteur de mon ennui

But nature cannot help her and she suddenly collapses and gives *Adonis* a final, passionate kiss (Emporte chez les morts ce baiser tout de flamme), as she ceases to speak and vanishes from sight in

the gathering shadows. It has been noted that this monologue owes much to Virgil, but it takes a form which can only be called Racinian. Its pace and development, its pathetic accents, its tenaciously illogical arguments, all suggest Racine's manner in the great tragedies which he began writing about 10 years later. Valéry has ingeniously suggested that young Racine (not yet 20 years old in 1658 and intimately acquainted with La Fontaine by 1660) must have known *Adonis* very well and may have been aided by it to discover his own genius.

Whether or not this be true, La Fontaine, at least, has clearly exhibited his own maturity as a poet. Like all his longer works, *Adonis* has uneven qualities and weak passages but, viewed as a whole, it is a masterpiece of creative art and of poetic diction. Its grace of movement, its sustained resonance and rich evocative power, mark an advance, both in feeling and in expression, over the technique of *L'Eunuque*. Many lines of *Adonis* deserve to be called "poésie pure," in the best sense of this expression, because their harmonies and overtones communicate an emotional effect far beyond the mere meaning of the words. La Fontaine has found his way in one medium, the Alexandrine, and, without worshipping rules of rhyme and versification, has learned to write verse which is musical and extremely flexible. Perhaps, as Valéry has intimated, this mastery of strict prosody was a necessary step in his development, before he could undertake to forge a new instrument, the free verse of his fables. But *Adonis* is more than a forward step; it represents La Fontaine's highest accomplishment in the domain of poetry patterned closely on the writings of antiquity. His glances in the directions of Saint-Gelais, Ronsard, and Marino, hold an omen for the future; in his tales he will sample the fruits of French and Italian soil, then in his fables arrive at the variegated style which mixes elevated and familiar tones, ancient and modern themes, serious thought and Gallic wit. *Adonis*, with its restrained poetic form, its ardent but muted lyricism, and its sober respect for the great literature of the past, is La Fontaine's most purely classical composition.

### 3. *Virgil and Horace.*

If Terence provided La Fontaine with the substance of his first play and Ovid served him primarily as a furnisher of stories and themes, Virgil and Horace were mentors who helped to form his poetic style. He seldom borrowed directly from them but their subtle influence on his writing was very far-reaching. La Fontaine drew more obviously from many other authors for ideas and incidents but the effect of these two Latin poets on his work was more general, more pervasive, and more deeply significant in his poetic development.

Only once in his early years did La Fontaine translate or imitate Virgil and Horace at all extensively—and this effort was mainly limited to the former—in a curious project which he undertook in the sixteen-sixties. In 1665 and 1667 Pierre Le Petit, a publisher who often collaborated with the Jansenists, brought out two volumes of a partial French translation of Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, done by a certain Louis Giry who was a venerable member of the Academy, a prolific translator, and a Port-Royal sympathizer. Giry needed the help of a poet to render in French verse the many brief quotations from Virgil and other Latin poets which Saint Augustine had scattered through his work. Somehow La Fontaine was brought to his attention, perhaps through some Oratorian or Jansenist friend such as Desmares or Brienne, and agreed to take on the task. In a prefatory note Giry refers to La Fontaine as having "beaucoup de vertu,—un grand mérite, un fort beau génie pour la poésie française." He perhaps did not realize that the poet was virtually unknown, having published nothing but *L'Eunuque*, and he would have been scandalized to learn that the first volume of the licentious *Contes* was going to appear at almost the same moment as the translation of Augustine's treatise inspired by the fall of Rome.

La Fontaine's translations of Virgil consist of some thirty-five short passages, with the Latin hexameters rendered, in almost every case, in Alexandrines. Very often it takes three lines to convey in French one or two lines of Virgil's denser idiom. La Fontaine usually respects the meaning of the original but seldom attempts to be literal. He revises the order of Virgil's ideas, alters their emphasis, sometimes goes far astray when searching for an equivalent with

artistic value or rhyming possibilities, and reveals that he is intent on writing poetry rather than a mere translation. Here and there the personality of Virgil disappears entirely, giving place to the author who would excel in tales and fables. A scene of heroic violence and bloodshed is toned down so that it becomes ironic and faintly amusing: "Rien ne leur fut sacré: leur insolence extrême;/Osa bien enlever la déesse elle-même." (OD, 746). On occasion he adds to his source (or borrows from nearby passages in the poems of Virgil), introducing a note of personal reflection or a touch of nature suggestive of the fables:

Lors Jupiter descend au sein de son épouse,  
Et d'une humeur féconde arrose les guérets,  
Réjouit les moissons, rend le vert aux forêts. (OD, 749)

But on the whole La Fontaine maintains the spirit of Virgil very well, notably in certain longer efforts such as the description of the spoils of war stored in Juno's temple (p. 747) or the prophecy of Rome's destiny (p. 750), and in many individual lines which stay close to the Latin text both in meaning and in sonority. Lines like these:

Pardonner aux vaincus et dompter les superbes. (p. 746)  
Dieux qui veillez toujours pour le salut de Troie. (p. 748)  
J'ai vu dans d'autres champs transporter les moissons. (p. 752)

have an epic quality, a stern but simple grandeur, which only a very serious and appreciative pupil of Virgil could have produced.

La Fontaine carried out his assignment in good faith; he doubtless enjoyed working at the Latin poetry and even took an interest, occasionally, in Augustine's angry pages denouncing Roman gods and superstitions. Perhaps it was a pleasure to renew his acquaintance with a theologian whom he must have studied, although reluctantly, during his novitiate at the Oratoire. He surely glanced at Augustine's context preceding and following each quotation and indulgently accepted the rather distorted application of certain verses. In one of his translations he changes Jupiter from the mightiest of the gods (*deus unus et omnes*) into a Christian deity (*Seule divinité qui règne dans les cieux*, p. 751), a practice which he will often follow in his *Fables*. Following a suggestion from Augustine he adds to the words of Virgil and portrays Brutus as "Cruel, inexorable, aux siens même sévère" (p. 749). His readings in *The City*



of *God*, particularly the first chapters of Book V, are reflected in one of the best of his early fables, *L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits* (II, 13), with its ideas on charlatanism, astrology, and divine providence. But this debt is an isolated instance and it would never have been incurred without his predilection for the poetry of Virgil.

Of course La Fontaine did not wait for Giry's translation of *The City of God* to become interested in Virgil. He undoubtedly read the *Aeneid* in his student days and must have learned when still quite young to enjoy its pageantry and stirring scenes. As he became aware of his own poetic vocation, and certainly before the time of *Adonis*, he began reading Virgil's poetry more carefully, with great admiration for its polished form, its musicality and evocative power, its moments of tenderness and deep feeling, its calm and meditative quality, its perfection of taste and proportion, even its rather bookish erudition. Curiously enough he does not often recall the *Bucolics*; perhaps their somewhat artificial elegance appealed to him less than the easy-going pastoral literature which he could find closer to home, in D'Urfé's *Astrée*. What he will always cherish in Virgil is the magnificent nature poetry scattered through the *Georgics*, the first half of the *Aeneid*, and above all the story of Aeneas and Dido.

Allusions to Virgil and echoes of favorite passages in his works are to be found constantly in La Fontaine's writings, from *Adonis* onward. Many of them have been pointed out in scholarly editions, many others remain to be discovered. Virgil does not often lend himself to the scheme of comic or familiar pieces, such as the tales, but he appears very frequently in the fables and in all of La Fontaine's more ambitious undertakings. In *Adonis* one finds not merely the personality of Dido but also a conscious exploitation of famous or striking Virgilian lines. The author and many readers as well, must have recognized the turtle dove of the first *Bucolic* (nec gemere aëria cessabit turtur ab ulmo) at the beginning of an elaborate comparison to describe the moaning of Venus: "Telle sur un ormeau se plaint la tourterelle" (*OD*, 15). The technique of *Adonis*, where Ovid is fortified by a substantial dosage of Virgil and other readings, will be applied again and again, to the fables of Aesop and Phaedrus, to the legend of Psyche in Apuleius. In La Fontaine's *Psyché*, for example, the heroine utters a prayer—Faut-il

que la colère des dieux soit si grande?—which repeats a line from the beginning of the *Aeneid* (I, 11; *OD*, 217) and her reaction to a terrifying situation is reported in a translation of the words of Aeneas, confronted by Creusa's ghost: "... steteruntque comae et vox faucibus haesit" (II, 774; *OD*, 227). Many such reminiscences sprinkled through the fables, together with many epic phrases or allusions of uncertain source, many faintly Virgilian (or Homeric) epithets, the presence of many gods and goddesses or mythological names to personify natural phenomena—all this lends the fables an intermittent aura of antiquity, a sometimes playful solemnity which accounts for much of their charm.

Not every fable shows traces of Virgilian or heroic vocabulary and even the most elevated ones often contain bits of down to earth description or dialogue, but generally speaking the epic style is one of their most regularly recurring ingredients. The fox who pays an exaggerated compliment to the crow (*Vous êtes le phénix des hôtes de ces bois*) is more than an ingenious flatterer; he is a student of ancient poetry and folklore. One has only to read a few pages at random, or glance at certain fables like *L'Aigle et l'escarbot* (II, 8), *Phébus et Borée* (VI, 3), and *L'Hirondelle et les petits oiseaux* (I, 8), to see this influence at work. Used in small touches these periphrases and noble epithets are sometimes a source of humor, creating a delightful disproportion between matter and manner, but on occasion their tone is maintained throughout whole fables—as in *L'Oiseau blessé d'une flèche* (II, 6) or *Le Lion devenu vieux* (III, 14)—giving rise to brief but serious poems which seem like fragments of some mighty epic. That La Fontaine had a keen ear for these different levels of poetic style, and utilized them very deliberately, can be seen in the many pages where he discusses his art, for instance in the fable (II, 1) where he replies to certain critics and offers a sample in the epic manner, with details borrowed from the second book of the *Aeneid*.

A detailed study of La Fontaine's works would doubtless prove that Virgil's influence became progressively stronger, reaching its climax in Books VII to XII of the fables. These fables of 1678 and later, with their greater length and seriousness, their tendency toward philosophic speculation, their occasional reflections on national problems, their erudition, their chords of melancholy reverie, suggest that the poet was steeped in Virgil as never before, finding

in him a close kinship of ideas, of feeling, of outlook on life. One thinks of the proud and patriotic epilogue after Book XI, inspired by the closing lines of the *Georgics*, or of the sympathetic portrait of the poor but contented old gardener, "Un sage assez semblable au vieillard de Virgile" (XII, 20; *Georgics* IV, 125-146), or of the Virgilian agricultural details in *L'Homme et la Couleuvre* (X, 1). The swallow catching insects for her hungry nestlings (X, 6; *Georgics* IV, 15-17) reflects La Fontaine's appreciation for Virgil's animal scenes and his relish for the grouping of Latin words to produce surprising or richly ambiguous effects: the suggestion of maternal love and sacrifice in "nidis immitibus" is preserved in his "im-pitoyable joie." Another passage in the *Georgics* (II, 458-489) provided La Fontaine with the pattern of thought for the beautiful meditation on solitude in *Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol* (XI, 4), an imitative yet deeply personal and sincere expression of his love for nature.

If his opinions and attitudes come closest to Virgil in his later poems, his early ones foreshadow this development and yield many elusive traces of Virgil's presence. This is not a matter, merely, of allusions and reminiscences, or of occasional epic devices and flights of style, but something no less real although more intangible: a way of apprehending and describing the external world. In *Adonis* and in many of the first fables—even some of those which have a very limited scope—one catches a feeling, like that of Virgil, for the great expanse of nature, for the vastness and mystery of the universe. The description of a bird in flight, "Un milan, qui dans l'air planait, faisait la ronde" (IV, 11), a reference to wintertime "Quand Phébus régnera sur un autre hémisphère" (IV, 3), or the dwelling place of a reed at the water's edge "Sur les humides bords des royaumes du vent" (I, 22)—such lines, without being based on passages in Virgil, somehow suggest his spacious outlook or his sense of a divine power beyond the laws of life. This gift for setting realistic details against a distant, iridescent glow of universal truth (it has been aptly compared to the "impalpable light which graces the pictures of Claude Lorrain")<sup>1</sup> is a classical quality, found to some degree in all painters and poets of seventeenth-century France but above all in La Fontaine. And in his case it seems to come primarily from a long and affectionate communion with Virgil.

For he tends to follow Virgil not only in his vision of nature

but also in his manner of rendering it. He was never a mere copyist, of course, and even protested against those poets who "suivent en vrais moutons le pasteur de Mantoue" (*OD*, 646), but he was haunted by certain lines in the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics* and kept trying to mimic or duplicate them in French so as to preserve as much as possible of the original rhythmic and musical effects. Many of these brief translations—of a vivid image, incident, or descriptive feature—are woven unobtrusively into La Fontaine's poetry. The sharp sounds of barking dogs in *Adonis* (Répondent à sa voix, frappent l'air de leurs cris), the appearance of the dying boar (Ses yeux d'un somme dur sont pressés et couverts), the games of swimming birds in an early fable (Tantôt courir sur l'onde, et tantôt se plonger), Acante's request that the zephyrs relay his love story, in *Clymène* (Portez-en quelque chose aux oreilles des dieux)—all these are literally and vigorously translated from lines by Virgil.<sup>2</sup> La Fontaine sometimes reworked and repolished these favorite passages, just as his Latin predecessor had done. The picture of an oak tree whose branches stretch to the skies and whose roots go down to Hades occurs first in the *Georgics* (II, 291-2), then in a revised form in the *Aeneid* (IV, 445-6): "... et, quantum vertice ad auras/ Aethereas, tantum radice in Tartara tendit." La Fontaine recalled this image first in a letter to his wife in 1663 and mentioned seeing certain towers which touched, like Virgil's oaks, "D'un bout au ciel, d'autre bout aux enfers" (*OD*, 547). Then, a few years later, after consulting the *Aeneid* to freshen his memory, he composed the superb closing lines of one of his best fables, *Le Chêne et le roseau* (I, 22): "Celui de qui la tête au ciel était voisine,/ Et dont les pieds touchaient à l'empire des morts." A later example of this same process, and this time closer to the music of the source, can be seen in his two versions of the final verse of the first *Bucolic*, "Maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae." In *Philémon et Baucis* this becomes: "... Et déjà les vallons/ Voyaient l'ombre en croissant tomber du haut des monts"—and in 1691 it turns up again, in slightly briefer compass, as a line in the libretto of *Astrée*: "L'ombre croît en tombant de nos prochains coteaux" (*OD*, 442). The assimilation of Latin prosody into French—usually of hexameters into Alexandrines—leaves its mark very often but very subtly on the poetry of La Fontaine. Whether he is translating a specific passage or unconsciously echoing a pattern of sounds lodged in

some deep corner of his memory he seems repeatedly to model his style on the lofty elegance and mellowness of Virgil.

Such an influence cannot well be isolated and measured. A verse which strikes the reader as Virgilian or which even may be clearly inspired by the *Aeneid*—for example: “Et dont les pieds touchaient à l’empire des morts”—makes its effect only partly through rhythm and sonority; the rest comes from the meaning of the words, their context and power to awaken the imagination, the imagery and the esthetic relations which it produces. In this instance it is obvious enough that sentence structure, absence of pauses, unemphatic accents, and the series of crisp consonants all lead up to a strong climax in “morts,” a word of prolonged resonance and contrasting color and also a long-awaited rhyme. But “morts” occurs in a phrase which has many poetic associations and the word itself has a finality of meaning as well as of position. A play on words is also involved, for the majestic oak tree has been uprooted by the wind, thus leaving yet joining the empire of the dead, as though its deep roots were a premonition of its fate. Furthermore, “morts” has no resemblance, either in tone or stress, to the climactic word “tendit” employed by Virgil. Thus La Fontaine’s use of a single word suffices to reveal an infinitely complex problem, not easily solved through metrical or phonetic science. And it goes without saying that his imitation of Virgil did not take place in a vacuum. Other Latin poets made their contribution too—the narrative technique of Ovid, the satirical and moralizing verse of Horace, the plaintive harmonies of the elegiac poets—and all these currents from antiquity were swollen or deflected by more modern cross-currents. The Renaissance enthusiasm for Roman poetry and the austere reforms of Malherbe both play some part in La Fontaine’s efforts as a disciple of Virgil.

However indirect the influence on his versification, however impossible to define, it looms very large in La Fontaine’s more serious poetry and fables. He seems to derive from Virgil, ultimately, his conception of the Alexandrine line as a forceful and versatile artistic entity, as an instrument peculiarly adapted for sounding epic notes. His Latin model does much to endow him with a certain fullness and density in his lines, a calculated handling of alliteration and assonance, a careful spacing or progression of accents to underline his thought, and most of all a resonant or mellifluous smoothness

which eludes description—in a word the harmonious and powerful intensity which dominates many of his fables and raises them to the highest level of poetic art.

But his most constant need was variety and he could not be satisfied with Virgil's Olympian nectar as a steady diet. Idealism, aloof beauty, deep meditation could not hold his attention very long; and as an antidote he sought the company of other poets, especially Horace, who could offer greater realism, more flesh and blood, a warmer and more amusing personality. He readily acknowledged his changing tastes and enthusiasms—"Tu cours en un moment de Térence à Virgile" (*OD*, 643)—and he could just as quickly desert Virgil for Marot, or Malherbe for Ovid. It may be recalled that, according to D'Olivet, he came under the spell of Malherbe when he was 22 years old and began writing odes in imitation of the great reformer, a vehement style almost as elevated as the epic manner of Virgil. But this intoxication did not last for long:

Un de ses parents, nommé Pintrel, homme de bon sens et qui n'était pas ignorant, lui fit comprendre que, pour se former, il ne devait pas se borner à nos poètes français, qu'il devait lire, et lire sans cesse Horace, Virgile, Térence. Il se rendit à ce sage conseil.<sup>3</sup>

Of course he would have soon discovered his affinity for these Latin poets but his cousin's advice, which he followed with characteristic docility, may have saved him a little time.

It is perhaps this same incident which he recalls in his *Épître à Huet*, where he admits that he once became the disciple of a "certain auteur"—quite possibly Malherbe—whose talents were very different from his own: "Il pensa me gêner. A la fin, grâce aux Cieux,/ Horace, par bonheur, me dessilla les yeux" (*OD*, 646). Horace did, indeed, open his eyes. He could admire and appreciate many Latin poets but in Horace he found almost a mirror of himself. Here was a poet of wide culture, a convivial man of the world yet a lover of the country scenes around his Sabine farm, an artist with the highest standards but at the same time a flair for colloquial speech, an indolent Epicurean guided by temperance and common sense, a serious moralist endowed with an indulgent sense of humor, a malicious observer of humanity and a commentator on his own weaknesses, above all a changeable and versatile craftsman who

could excel at all levels from the ridiculous to the sublime. La Fontaine's opinion of Horace is defined most clearly in *Clymène*, a graceful poem in dialogue, a comedy but not intended for the stage, in which the Muses display the various types of poetry of which they are capable. Here Horace gains still another victory over Malherbe. When Calliope attempts to declaim an eloquent ode like those of Malherbe she is obliged to confess her failure after a single stanza. Then Apollo asks Polymnia to recite something a little less pompous, in the manner of Horace:

L'on ne réussit pas toujours comme on souhaite. . . .  
C'est pourquoi choisissez des tons un peu moins hauts.  
Horace en a de tous; voyez ceux qui vous duisent.  
J'aime fort les auteurs qui sur lui se conduisent:  
Voilà les gens qu'il faut à présent imiter. (*OD*, 34)

A poet of every tone, an excellent mentor for contemporary authors, but one not easy to equal. For although Polymnia consents to try her hand at a Horatian song, a *carpe diem* warning to Clymène, she does so reluctantly, pointing out that Horace's spirit can no longer be recaptured. La Fontaine may have despaired of matching the exquisite art of Horace but at least he could enjoy it, study it, and very often profit from it.

He did not often translate Horace closely or imitate him at any length. His work for Giry's edition of *The City of God* included only three brief passages from the Latin poet. Two of these he rendered very loosely and in a spirit more "Horatian" than his model, adding a humorous phrase (*La recette en est bonne*) and a moral lesson (*Rien ne manque au bonheur du sage*) not present in the original texts (*OD*, 750-751). The third effort was more successful: a well-known, almost proverbial expression from one of the *Epistles* (I, ii, 69-70) which he turned into a well-rounded couplet: "*Le vase étant imbu d'une bonne liqueur/ En conserve longtemps et le goût et l'odeur*" (*OD*, 746). It is not surprising that these words came back to La Fontaine as he was writing one of his fables (*Le vase est imbibé, l'étoffe a pris son pli*, II, 18), for the fables of 1668 are charged with countless small reminiscences of Horace's poetry.

Horace himself was a lover of fables and, in various satires and epistles, he either related fables or alluded to them as illustrations of his thought. His lively and colorful narration of certain of these

age-old stories—such as the city mouse and the country mouse, at the end of one of his satires (II, vi)—may well have attracted La Fontaine to the genre or helped to make him aware of its artistic possibilities. In the case of this particular fable (I, 9) and several others La Fontaine, while borrowing from various sources, had the text of Horace in his mind and perhaps even open on his writing table. The brief story of the mountain giving birth to a mouse (V, 10) could have come from many authors but the moral slant is definitely taken from Horace's *Ars poetica* (lines 136–139). Similarly, the dialogue of the ox and the frog (I, 3) is patterned after a conversation in one of the satires (II, iii, 316–320). The taunt which the rat addresses to the trapped weasel: “. . . Vous aviez lors la panse un peu moins pleine./ Vous êtes maigre entrée, il faut maigre sortir” (III, 17)—could not have been expressed this way without the precedent offered by Horace: “. . . Si vis, ait, effugere istinc/ Macra cavum repetes arctum, quem macra subisti” (*Epistles*, I, vii, 32–33). And there are many other, slighter echoes, scattered phrases or single lines, such as “Ainsi dans les dangers qui nous suivent en croupe” (III, 12; *Odes*, III, 1) or “Un homme qui s’aimait sans avoir de rivaux” (I, 11; *Ars poetica*, 443–444). Unlike Virgil, who was a source of poetic moods and sounds, Horace served La Fontaine as a source of realistic story-telling effects: keenly visualized descriptive details, bits of sparkling dialogue, striking glimpses of human character, sudden contrasts, punch lines, epigrammatic phraseology.

Allusions to Horace and recollections of his poetry are to be found also in many of the later writings of La Fontaine along, perhaps, with an increasing but imponderable influence on his moral outlook. Nothing could be more uncertain than the system of ethics so often attributed to La Fontaine on the basis of the lessons in his fables. Most of these teachings were traditional, inherent in the texts of Aesop and other sources, and he merely adopted them with little or no personal conviction. How often they contradict one another, how often indeed they contradict the tenor or feeling of the very fables to which they are appended! For it is in the body of the fables, far more often than in the moral lesson, that La Fontaine intervenes to add his own reflections and attitudes. And this technique of self-revelation, this freedom of expression—which itself probably owes something to Horace, along with a few other



introspective spirits such as Montaigne—is only partially developed in the early fables; it will not reach ripeness until the collection of 1678–79. Yet throughout his life, particularly in his maturity and declining years, La Fontaine's thought affords many parallels to that of Horace. This seems to come about not so much through imitation, conscious or unconscious, as through a fortuitous and very close personal resemblance between the two poets. Like Horace in his *Epistles*, La Fontaine teaches a common-sense philosophy of life, a mixture of Stoicism and Epicureanism without any of their extreme positions, a sort of wisdom which is idealistic yet homely and indulgent. They both love the same themes: generosity, kindness, friendship, liberty, simplicity, honesty, temperance, rusticity, the joys of solitude. They both distrust adventure and heroism. They both emphasize tolerance, and tolerance to themselves, for they readily admit their inability always to heed their own advice. The poet who cherished his personal independence and proudly confessed that he liked to go wherever the weather called him (*Quo me cumque rapit tempestas, deferor hospes*, *Epistles*, I, i, 15), was clearly an intellectual ancestor whose moral viewpoints were bound to be reconceived or reinterpreted by La Fontaine.

As literary critics they also have much in common. The idea that poets must remain true to their talents was a deep-rooted principle with Horace and formed part of his doctrine of artistic consistency set forth in the *Ars poetica*. The principle, together with an accretion of details from other theorists, found very wide acceptance in seventeenth-century France, and naturally appealed strongly to La Fontaine. In the preface to his first volume of fables, he took advantage of it to justify his liberties in changing Aesop and his suppression of certain moral lessons. It is better to relinquish a subject than to spoil it, he insists, and quotes from Horace to prove his point. The advantage of this concept for La Fontaine, was that it left him comparatively free to follow his own artistic instincts, both in his choice of materials and in his handling of them, free to disregard most other literary rules and precepts. The prefaces for his various works are full of theoretical discussions but he is far less concerned with rules than with tastes—his own and those of the public—and with the logical solution of the esthetic problems which confronted him. This common-sense approach to literary questions, very similar to that of Horace, perhaps explains why the *Ars poetica*

was his favorite literary manual and why, without being particularly influenced by it, he kept returning to it and rereading it. He was not ignorant of other theorists and often, to forestall unfriendly criticism, he would cite Quintilian, or occasionally Cicero and Longinus, or with less accuracy Aristotle, as permitting the technique employed in his poetry, but his allusions to Horace's *Ars poetica* reveal close knowledge of the text and real enjoyment of it. In his first volume of tales he refers to Horace to defend their licentiousness and in the second volume uses the same authority in support of their uniform gayety of tone and their happy endings. Or again, when snubbed by Lulli, he would write a spirited condemnation of opera, finding arguments in Horace to prove that it is an overloaded and bastard form of art (*OD*, 615). La Fontaine liked ideas but could not tolerate pedantry or dullness, hence his relish for the *Ars poetica*. Horace's non-technical presentation, his flashes of humor, his use of vivid examples, his telling phrases and epigrams, all made his *Ars poetica* a work of literature and one of those which La Fontaine could best appreciate. In substance and in manner it was the kind of treatise on poetry which he himself might have written.

His reincarnation of Horace is not confined to ethical and literary standards but suggests itself, even more strongly, in his opinion of himself as a poet. Without any self-depreciation he came to feel, like Horace, that his gifts were minor ones, suited to small genres and graceful verse but not often capable of rising to levels of prolonged eloquence and seriousness. After *Adonis* his epic aspirations were infrequent and generally on a smaller scale, he attempted to write a tragedy but left it unfinished, and he recognized more and more that he could succeed best in the realms of light fiction, satire, and personal lyricism. This does not mean, of course, that he was not a careful and conscientious artist, but simply that he realized the limits of his genius, and found himself more at home in certain so-called minor genres where he had full freedom, full use of his special talents. In accepting this mission he must have consoled himself with the example of Horace, a poet similarly gifted who had achieved immortality by exploiting his native powers to perfection in the small domain of songs, satires, and letters in verse. Horace admitted repeatedly that he could not do justice to epic subjects, that his "pudor imbellisque lyrae Musa" forbade him to praise

great heroes such as Caesar or Augustus.<sup>4</sup> La Fontaine will also say that he is unfit to treat deeds of warfare and heroism (in dedicating each volume of fables and on several other occasions) and, probably with the words of Horace running through his mind, that he scarcely dares pay tribute to Louis XIV:

Mais je crains de passer le but de mon ouvrage:  
 Il faut plus de loisir pour louer ce héros;  
 Une Muse modeste et sage  
 Ne touche qu'en tremblant à des sujets si hauts.  
 Je me tais donc, et rentre au fond de mes retraites;  
 J'y trouve des douceurs secrètes. (*OD*, 661).

This professional humility is not entirely genuine, of course, but one cannot help being surprised to find Horace and La Fontaine striking exactly the same pose. When the latter defines his art as "Une Muse modeste et sage," he seems to be reënacting the role of his Latin predecessor, seeking to become the Horace of France. Which, indeed, was his destiny. Horace and La Fontaine are perhaps the two outstanding poets who have won a wide and everlastingly affectionate audience through modesty, variety, naturalness, and personal magnetism. They have come down through the ages with no great master works in their baggage but simply a collection of many-hued gems which glow with warmth and beauty.

#### 4. *The Legacy of Latin Literature.*

During La Fontaine's long formative period his richest inspiration in Latin literature came from a quartet of poetic voices, the contrasting yet seldom discordant harmonies of Terence, Ovid, Virgil, and Horace. But there are a multitude of other Latin writers, both of prose and of poetry, whom he enjoyed reading, from whom he occasionally borrowed a plot or a theme, and whom he sometimes imitated stylistically in his own writing. This is not the place to study the tangled sources of his fables, nor even to catalogue his more obvious allusions and reminiscences, but it will be useful to survey his range of knowledge in Latin literature and assess its contribution to his art.

In point of time his readings seldom go back beyond Terence, in the second century B.C., or forward beyond Ovid and Livy, or

sometimes Seneca, in the first decades of the Christian era; they are generally confined to the great writers of the Golden Age. To be sure he has a certain familiarity with a number of later authors, such as Juvenal, Martial, Quintilian, Petronius, Lucan, the elder and younger Pliny, and possibly Tacitus, but at this stage of his career he seems to absorb very little from them beyond an occasional fact or phrase. The only exception to this rule is Apuleius, whose version of the Psyche legend in *The Golden Ass* provided much of the material for La Fontaine's *Psyché*, composed collaterally with the first fables and published soon after, in 1669. He seemed to prefer that great period in Latin literature when the turbulence and strife reflected in Caesar and Cicero were giving way to the calm classicism of Horace and Virgil, as Rome reached the height of its power and culture. Perhaps he sensed in the advent and brilliant reign of Augustus an appealing resemblance to his own epoch in France—the violent forces at work in the middle of the century which Louis XIV was then consolidating and bringing under control. Whatever the reason, he turned repeatedly and habitually to the literary monuments of the Golden Age, to certain minor figures as well as major ones, to moralists and historians as well as poets.

He frequently expressed his admiration for Julius Caesar, both as a leader of men and as a writer of history (*OD*, 531, 532, 684 etc.), and doubtless gained from Caesar's *Commentaries* a feeling for the power and grandeur of the Roman Empire. Among Caesar's contemporaries in the literary world one would expect Catullus to have made a profound impression on La Fontaine, because of the intensity of his passion for the unscrupulous Lesbia, his sincere personal accents, his very graceful lyricism, his sensitive appreciation of nature. La Fontaine undoubtedly knew his poetry and had him in mind in some of his declarations of love addressed to Aminte or Clymène; Catullus seems to have contributed to the spontaneity and warmth of certain passages in *Adonis* or in the group of four elegies published in 1671. But the French poet apparently relished him also for his licentious realism and thought of him often in connection with the *Contes*. Régnier has noted reminiscences of Catullus in the tales (III, 7 and IV, 16) which reveal far greater interest in the physical than in the emotional aspects of love.

Catullus and Lesbia were not the only famous couples immortalized in Latin poetry. If La Fontaine shows comparatively little

awareness of Tibullus and his Delia, perhaps finding their romance too quiet, too sane, or too rustic, he follows with great interest the vicissitudes of violent passion in Propertius and Cynthia. Propertius seems to be his favorite elegiac poet and is recalled at moments in *Le Songe de Vaux*, in a theme of the elegy for Fouquet, and repeatedly in the four elegies of 1671. One of these contains a cry of helplessness (*Que faire? mon destin est tel qu'il faut que j'aime*, *OD*, 601) which is a striking parallel to a line by Propertius: *Mi fortuna aliquid semper amare dedit* (II, 22, 18). A similar sentiment (*Unicuique dedit vitium natura creato*, II, 22, 17) may have suggested the opening line of one of the fables (III, 7): *Chacun a son défaut, où toujours il revient*.<sup>1</sup> One cannot escape the impression that La Fontaine had a strong personal liking for Propertius and found in him a reflection of his own instability and infidelity, his own tendency toward melancholy self-denunciation.

A very different aspect of his personality aroused his devotion to Lucretius, the poet of retirement and scientific speculation, the prophet of an intelligent and moderate Epicurean system. To be sure, the spirit of Lucretius will not become manifest until the fables of 1678-79, where La Fontaine finds a new stimulus in science and philosophy and preaches the atomistic theories of Epicurus as modified by Gassendi, Bernier, and other contemporary thinkers. That this influence was not always a fortunate one may be seen in the tedious didacticism of *Le Quinquina* (1682), where La Fontaine proclaims that he is a "Disciple de Lucrèce" (*OD*, 60). Yet even in the early fables, amid much conventional moralizing, he seems often to mirror the Lucretian view of life. The two poets had in common their vein of compassion for the common man, their hatred of superstition, their horror of war and political intrigue, and their conception of pleasure as avoidance of excess and as the refined enjoyment of simple things. La Fontaine borrows only a few concrete details from Lucretius but one of these instances is significant: the lines in honor of Venus at the start of the *De rerum natura*, recalled in a description of springtime (*Fables*, IV, 22):

... le temps

Que tout aime et que tout pullule dans le monde:

Monstres marins au fond de l'onde,

Tigres dans les forêts, alouettes aux champs. . .

Up to the time of his first fables La Fontaine seems to have been

attracted very little by the scientific inquiries of Lucretius, but quite appreciably by his moral outlook and most of all by his love of nature and his ability to catch the stir of life in fields and forests.

Some of La Fontaine's knowledge of Epicureanism, and of Stoicism too, may have been imparted to him by Cicero, in such treatises as *De finibus*, *De natura deorum* and *De officiis*. For if he admired the oratory of Cicero, as many allusions go to show, he was also familiar with the didactic writer and second-hand thinker who popularized so many Greek philosophical doctrines and preached a sort of gentlemanly Stoicism. It was in his old age that La Fontaine, along with Maucroix, took Cicero most seriously—this becomes apparent in his recently discovered letter to his friend and collaborator, written in 1693 (OD, 725-728). Quite possibly, during the first half of his life, he merely read certain famous passages in school texts and referred to the tracts on rhetoric when they might prove useful. It is rather surprising to find the Roman statesman's name invoked, in the preface to the first volume of his *Contes*, to defend their "propriety," *i.e.* the indecency characteristic of the genre. No less incongruous is his allusion to Scipio's dream—the eloquently solemn vision of the heavenly dwelling of righteous souls, at the close of Cicero's *De re publica*—which he cites in the same breath (OD, 77) with the *Roman de la Rose* and a Renaissance allegorical novel as precedents for the imaginary descriptions in his overwritten and precious *Songe de Vaux*. He would have to wait many years before appreciating Cicero's earnest and widely ranging mentality but already, probably, he had some enthusiasm for the orator's great gifts of expression and considered him a master of prose style.

Another source of modernized, Romanized Stoicism was offered in the moral epistles of the younger Seneca. There is nothing to show whether or not La Fontaine was acquainted with Seneca's minor works or with his tragedies for recitation, which were much imitated by Garnier and other playwrights of the sixteenth century, but he eventually became a serious student of the *Epistulae morales*. One of the fables of 1679, *Le Vieillard et les trois jeunes hommes* (XI, 8), takes its incidents and ideas from several of these letters. It was in the sixteen seventies that La Fontaine worked with his cousin, Pierre Pintrel, on a project very similar to the one undertaken for Giry. His cousin translated the epistles of Seneca into French and

he himself supplied verse translations of the passages in poetry quoted by the Latin author; this time, however, La Fontaine played some part in revising Pintrel's text and prepared it for publication in 1681. How much he read Seneca, prior to this collaboration with his cousin, is very hard to say. The early fables contain many touches of Stoicism—usually maxims or epigrammatic phrases rather than ideas developed at length—and if these can sometimes be traced back to Seneca they are really commonplace expressions, constantly repeated by French authors of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Even when La Fontaine's ultimate source is clearly Seneca, as in *La Mort et le malheureux* (I, 15) he may have found the passages which inspired him in an essay by Montaigne. During the years when La Fontaine was growing up various followers or remote descendants of Montaigne—Charron, Malherbe and his disciples, Du Vair, Balzac, Corneille, even Gomberville—had established a kind of Christian Stoicism which, along with the ideal of "honnêteté," formed the prevailing moral climate in France. Directly or indirectly, young La Fontaine owed certain ways of thought to Seneca, but so did most of his contemporaries who possessed some measure of breeding and taste.

This objection cannot minimize, however, the important cumulative influence which Latin culture as a whole exerted on La Fontaine. Whether or not he understood the teachings of Cicero, he obviously came in close and prolonged contact with a large number of Roman authors. To be sure the informed public of his century and most men of letters enjoyed a sound classical education and could read Latin without hardship, but few people, except professional translators, could match his deep and intimate communion with the literature of antiquity. A man of erudition, a seeker of poetic beauty in distant realms, he carried on almost alone the tradition of the Renaissance and heralded the oncoming generation of Boileau and Racine which, once again, would turn to past ages for its inspiration. He sampled all sorts of Latin authors and, guided by a sure sense of artistic values or by an awareness of his own needs, singled out some of the greatest poets for special attention and deliberate imitation. The distinguishing mark of La Fontaine's early career is his conscious effort to evolve a style, or a variety of styles, attuned to the everchanging moods of his complex personality. The myths of Ovid, the comic scenes of Terence, the organ tones of Virgil, the

tolerant wisdom of Horace, the delight in nature of Lucretius—all these and other impulses too awakened a response which he was quick to recognize and cultivate.

This does not mean that he forced himself to study and copy Roman masters. For his was a labor of love, not a dutiful apprenticeship in a dead but honorable language. He approached Latin literature with enthusiasm and found it alive and modern. He rejoiced in the beauty of ancient poetry, often pausing to reread outstanding passages or commit them to memory. His mind gradually became stocked with innumerable Latin lines and phrases, and some pertinent reminiscence would come to the surface in connection with any subject which concerned him. In one of his later letters there is a single paragraph, slightly affected perhaps but surely unrehearsed, where he quotes fondly—and somewhat inaccurately—from the *Georgics*, from Terence's *Phormio*, from the *Aeneid*, and also from Rabelais (*OD*, 712). Reading Latin authors was one of his most enjoyable pastimes; he could lose himself in books and forget the necessities of daily life. Livy's history of Rome, probably a favorite since his days in school, traveled with him on his way to Limousin and one day almost caused him to miss his dinner at the hotel:

... m'étant allé promener dans le jardin, je m'attachai tellement à la lecture de Tite-Live qu'il se passa plus d'une bonne heure sans que je fisse réflexion sur mon appétit. . . . (*OD*, 542)

Oftentimes his absent-mindedness seems to have arisen from an intense preoccupation with literature, an immersion in some book which could be Latin just as well as French. Few poets of his own or later centuries have shown such zest and affection for the literary art of ancient Rome.

The most striking characteristic of this art, particularly during the Golden Age, was its aristocratic elegance, a selfconscious effort to rival or surpass the masterpieces of Greece in perfection of style and form. If colloquial elements sometimes found their way into the shorter poems of Catullus and the satires of Horace, the usual tendency of all authors, including these, was to write in an elevated literary language, very polished and pure, taking every advantage of musical and stylistic effects, and scrupulously observing the rules of prosody or rhetoric. This highly distilled art, so dear to La Fontaine and so often imitated by him, had an immeasurable influence in the



shaping of his poetry. He owes to it not merely the Latin subjects which he borrows, not merely the epic pieces or Virgilian lines scattered with great effectiveness throughout the fables, but in some degree his very sense of style and form. Without his close companionship with Horace and other Latin poets he would have possessed less dexterity in handling all the technical devices which enliven his poetry—alliteration, assonance, rhythmic patterns, epigrammatic phrasing, antitheses, sudden contrasts, subtle changes of pace or tone, and many others. Just as his longer meditative fables seem Lucretian in conception, his shorter ones in vignette form have a concision and restraint suggestive of the compact lyricism of Horace and Catullus. The great stylists of Latin literature have left their shadow on every page of his works.

He also inherited from the Latin classics a body of thought which weighs heavily on all his teachings as a moralist. This complex of ideas and values, a fusion of Stoic and Epicurean doctrines, may have sprung originally from Greek philosophers, and it may have been acquired largely through the trends of his own age in France, but it was surely reinforced by his extensive readings in Horace, Cicero, Seneca, and other Roman thinkers. With Horace in particular he had a bond of sympathy, a personal attachment, which became stronger as his life progressed and made him seem, at times, a replica of his ancient forebear. La Fontaine remained in step with the tastes and ideas of his times, he never broke with the tenets of the Church, yet he expressed a sincere and unique paganism, born of his profound appreciation for the beauty and wisdom of Latin literature. Whoever attempts to study the "sources" of the fables will find many types of influence to deal with. The least important, usually, is the textual borrowing, the story and moral taken over from such authors as Aesop and Phaedrus. In most cases all the artistry, all the overtones of thought and feeling, the total esthetic and intellectual meaning, come from elsewhere. Consciously or not, La Fontaine is constantly inspired on the one hand by many great poets, on the other by many philosophers or moralists of centuries past. Latin literature was not his only cultural nourishment but it was perhaps the purest and most abundant; it helped to shape all that is serious and noble in his art.

### 5. *The Glory that was Greece.*

Far beyond the Roman world, yet linked with it and breathing life into it, lay the brilliant civilization of ancient Greece, at once more primitive and more versatile in its accomplishments, and richer in great artists and philosophers. The two cultures, one an outgrowth of the other, are almost inextricably mingled in their effect on modern literature. La Fontaine may perhaps have been drawn to the comedies of Terence because of their Athenian setting, he may have preferred the Trojan to the Italian elements in the *Aeneid*, he may have loved the tales of Ovid for their evocation of Hellenic myths and legends. It is doubtful whether he himself made a clear distinction between Greek stoicism and that of Cicero or between Pythagorean theories and their faint reflection in the final book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. His knowledge of Epicurus—whom he called the "plus bel esprit de la Grèce" in his beautiful *Hymne à la Volupté* (*OD*, 256)—probably came almost entirely from the philosophical poem by Lucretius. In many cases Greek and Roman writers made a joint impact on his mind, fusing into a single and rather blurred image of ancient literature and thought.

La Fontaine refers to or discusses a great many Greek authors but not always with the same competence or understanding which he displays when dealing with Latin literature. On several occasions, for instance in *Psyché*, he speaks admiringly of Menander's comic art as the best which has come down from the Greek stage (ce bel art—dans sa plus grande perfection, et tel que Ménandre et Sophocle nous l'ont laissé, *OD*, 153). He was apparently guided by certain tributes paid to Menander, probably those of Terence and Plutarch, and did not realize that, in the seventeenth century, Menander's plays survived only in scattered fragments. But what of Aristophanes, whose plays were available and to whom Racine doubtless introduced him, but whom he never bothered to mention in his writings? His allusions do not by any means offer a sure index of his readings and tastes in Greek literature.

A further difficulty in weighing his Attic inheritance is that it permeated to him through Latin or French renderings. In spite of his attempt in 1680 to translate a dialogue by Plato—a single and abortive effort, probably—he could not read Greek texts with ease and habitually used translations, as D'Olivet and Louis Racine

have both pointed out. He may have envisaged Plutarch almost as a Renaissance biographer and moralist in the admirable French translation by "le bon Amyot,"<sup>1</sup> a great literary work in its own right, but he may also have seen mediocre or grossly inaccurate versions of certain other authors. In any event, translators could<sup>1</sup> seldom transmit the stylistic qualities of the original texts. Unlike Latin, the Greek language did not exert a noticeable influence on La Fontaine's poetic manner. His indirect approach could provide him with ideas and themes, with a wealth of facts and general impressions, but most of the small details of vocabulary, syntax, and versification—in a word the literary craftsmanship—were bound to elude his grasp.

Even within these limits his knowledge of Greek literature seems to have been incomplete and superficial. Like most of his contemporaries he is always rather vague when speaking of the Athenian drama. As an episode in *Psyché* (*OD*, 172–182) he included a discussion on the relative merits of tragedy and comedy and sought to display his literary and esthetic erudition. Yet, amid learned allusions to Homer, Plato, and Longinus, he kept coupling the names of Sophocles and Euripides, as though he considered them strikingly similar or almost synonymous, and cited no humorous writers except Terence and D'Urfé, this last for the mock-pastoral character of Hylas in *L'Astrée*. His only allusion to Aeschylus—"le bonhomme Eschyle" as he calls him—will occur in one of the fables (*VIII*, 16), where he simply utilizes an unlikely anecdote handed down by Valerius Maximus. He once pays his respects to Pindar, listing him among the nine immortal poets of the world (*OD*, 401) but nowhere shows a real appreciation for his odes. Among Greek historians he was acquainted with Thucydides, but not with Xenophon, if one may judge by his silence concerning the latter. A few orators were known to him, at least in the advanced years of his life: Demosthenes, perhaps through a translation by Maucroix, and Aeschines, from whom he drew material for one of his last tales (*V*, 2). He had only a remote familiarity with most of the Greek philosophers, acquired through Latin sources or through latter-day Greek compendium writers such as Diogenes Laertius. Curiously enough, although he must have come in contact with the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, he rarely referred to him and seemed to consider him primarily a logician (*OD*, 651). Apparently he made no attempt

to study, or even grow familiar with, the majestic, sweeping panorama of Greek literature. Large and important segments of it remained virtually unknown to him, at least until he was almost sixty years old. Neither the literature as a whole nor all its greatest artisans contributed to the nurturing and unfolding of his genius.

There are, of course, certain authors, relatively minor ones, whom La Fontaine imitated or drew upon for literary subjects. Without pausing here over Aesop and his descendants, who furnished him a genre and the basic materials with which to treat it, it will suffice to point out some of the other by-ways where his curiosity led him. He dipped more than once into a Latin translation of the *Deipnosophists*, the erudite compilation by Athenaeus, attracted by its countless anecdotes and bits of comic verse. His imitations of Athenaeus include an epigram on the folly of marriage (*OD*, 598) and three lively little stories in the first collection of tales (6, 7, 8). In *Adonis* he had already demonstrated some knowledge of the bucolic poets, Bion and Theocritus, and as an old man he returned to the latter's 23rd idyl for the main features of his *Daphnis et Alcimadure* (*Fables*, XII, 24), written for the widowed daughter of Mme de La Sablière. The refined voluptuousness of Anacreon (including the *Anacreontea*, for people of La Fontaine's day attributed the two bodies of poetry to a single author) also appealed to him from time to time throughout his life. His graceful compliments in verse to members of the Fouquet family sometimes seem to echo Anacreon's frivolous manner, perhaps rather deliberately, since one of them bears the title of *Ode anacréontique* (*OD*, 507). But La Fontaine was probably led to Anacreon by the translations of Belleau and Ronsard, and these earlier French poets, along with Marot and Voiture, far outweighed Anacreon in developing his gift for playful or flirtatious banter. This observation is borne out in his only imitations of Anacreon, two tales in verse (III, 11, 12), one of which is a brief and precious abridgment of the source. The other, his delightful *Amour mouillé*, comes closer to Belleau and Ronsard than to the Greek original but introduces several amusing details not found in any previous version. The name of Anacreon has become legendary to exemplify a mellow, light-hearted, or bibulous old age and La Fontaine, in his declining years, at least in his more Epicurean moments, very naturally felt a sort of kinship for the Ionian poet. In 1687, in his letters to friends in England he groups himself with

two other aging Anacreons: Saint-Evremond and the English poet, Edmund Waller (*OD*, 665, 669). But the resemblance was only slight and occasional; La Fontaine borrowed very little from his Greek predecessor and never imitated him closely.

Despite the negative nature of all these contacts he owed a very real debt to Greek literature, to the spirit of it rather than the letter, to its inner life rather than its outer form. He assimilated Attic culture to his own as did no other author of his century—Racine and Fénelon perhaps excepted—and without the help of scholarship or exhaustive reading. His understanding and love of ancient Greece was inspired almost entirely by three isolated, widely different authors: Plutarch, Plato, and Homer.

Thanks to the translation by Amyot he probably began reading Plutarch at a fairly early age, returning to him again and again in later years. But the extent of his knowledge is not easy to measure. Did he limit himself mainly to the *Vies parallèles*, which enjoyed great success throughout the seventeenth century, or did he also devote himself to studying the less popular *Œuvres morales*? How much did he acquire through Latin sources and above all how much from Montaigne or Charron, both of whom quoted Plutarch constantly and followed him so closely as a moralist? One biographer of La Fontaine has drawn up a list of possible reminiscences of Plutarch (and of Plutarch by way of Charron), nearly all from Books VII–XII of the *Fables*;<sup>2</sup> but many of them could have been found in other authors and they are generally not the sort of borrowings which D'Olivet has led us to expect. D'Olivet tells of having seen La Fontaine's copies of Plutarch and Plato, before their disappearance, and describes them as full of marginal notes in La Fontaine's handwriting, most of the notes being moral and political maxims jotted down for later use in the fables.<sup>3</sup> This could well be true, but ancient maxims and moral lessons have become proverbial and their vicissitudes are usually impossible to trace across the centuries.

On one occasion, in 1684, La Fontaine tried his hand as a literary disciple of Plutarch, writing an essay in honor of Le Grand Condé which he entitled *Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César, et de Monsieur le Prince* (*OD*, 680–692). Ever since Plutarch set the example authors have enjoyed matching Julius Caesar against Alexander the Great. La Fontaine was doubtless aware of such comparisons done by Montaigne and by Saint-Evremond, and seized upon the idea to pay

his compliments to Condé, a national hero whom he idolized. He takes his method and most of his information from Plutarch, of course adding details of Condé's life and campaigns, together with some favorite Latin quotations and some astute personal observations which make his panegyric fairly palatable. This small-scale imitation of Plutarch is interesting chiefly as a token of La Fontaine's admiration for the *Lives*. Just like Shakespeare, who found in them ready-made plots for historical plays, he must have loved Plutarch's wonderfully told stories, his sense of drama and pathos, his wise insight into the character and motives of great men. Here was a book which offered the whole tableau of Greek and Roman history, a monument to the twin civilizations of antiquity, yet not an array of dry facts but a brilliant pageant expressed always in human terms. There is little doubt that these biographies provided La Fontaine with his main source of information concerning the lives and deeds of ancient warriors and statesmen.

He surely read, also, some of Plutarch's better-known moral essays. The first line of a poem composed in 1659, "Les oracles ont cessé" (*OD*, 487) seems to recall the title of Plutarch's work on oracles and there are several phrases and allusions scattered through the fables which may well have been inspired by the famous *Consolation to Apollonius*. The Preface to the fables of 1668 offers a discussion of *The Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* as testimony of the shrewdness of Aesop. Although it is not easy to say how directly or how deeply La Fontaine delved into Plutarch's moral and miscellaneous writings one finds repeatedly that the two men (and also Montaigne) have unanimous ethical views. Plutarch, like La Fontaine, was not a deep or original philosopher, but rather an observer of life and a practical moralist. They both attack the excesses of systems and doctrines and prescribe moderation as the essence of virtue. They both dwell warmly on the simple duties of daily life, on the joys of friendship, on the blessings of tranquillity. Their sense of humanity extends even to animals, which they seek to endow with souls. La Fontaine could have read with enjoyment, with approval, and with profit, almost every page which Plutarch wrote. Perhaps the greatest bond between them is their love of literature. Plutarch's mania for quotations may have opened La Fontaine's eyes to the art of other Greek authors. The many Homeric passages and the essay on Homer could very well have caused him

to read or reread the *Iliad*. The constant references to Plato and the various dialogues in a Platonic manner may have given him his literary introduction to a philosopher who soon became one of his gods.

Other forces, too, may have drawn him to Plato. Just as Platonic ethics and the concept of love had filtered their way into seventeenth-century social trends, such as "honnêteté" and "préciosité," so had Platonic idealism and metaphysics been grafted to certain offshoots of Christian theology. Saint Augustine, the Oratoire, Port-Royal, all tended to justify their positions by arguments based on Plato. But La Fontaine was doubtless influenced far less, in this instance, by the intellectual currents of his age than by the enthusiasm of two close friends, Maucroix and Racine, both of whom found delight in reading and translating Plato. In any event, he had already become conversant with the Greek philosopher by the time of the first fables—his preface of 1668 alludes to the comments on Aesop in *The Republic* and *Phaedo*—and his appreciation waxed greater with the passing of the years. Louis Racine has reported how La Fontaine, as an old man, sometimes bored his friends: "Il ne parlait point, ou voulait toujours parler de Platon, dont il avait fait une étude particulière dans la traduction latine."<sup>4</sup> During this period of his life, in 1687, fancying himself more and more as a student or teacher of philosophy, he acquired a collection of terra cotta busts of ancient thinkers to decorate his room, which he playfully called "la chambre des philosophes" (*OD*, 664). By this time he probably knew some of Plato's dialogues almost by heart.

Throughout his works, both early and late, one finds numerous recollections of his readings in Plato. These do not need to be reviewed in detail—the task has already been performed by Boulvé, superficially, and by Gohin, very carefully—but it is interesting to note how much he enjoyed Plato and how little he absorbed of Platonic doctrine. He possessed a sound knowledge of many dialogues—*Euthyphro*, the longer *Hippias*, *Euthydemus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Gorgias*, among others. One of his favorites was *Ion*, where a Greek rhapsode discussed the composition and recitation of poetry, and he drew from it the image "papillon du Parnasse" to describe his own genius; but in choosing this formula he disregards Plato's theory of divine inspiration and stresses variety and selectivity as the source of poetic art. In *Timaeus*, another

favorite, he overlooked the profound philosophic theories of Plato and seized upon the notion of a divine and inscrutable providence, a theme which accorded perfectly with the teachings of the Church. He drew opinions from Plato only when they corresponded to his own and, instead of sitting at the master's feet, saluted a spirit for whom he felt a literary affinity. Nothing appealed more to La Fontaine than the discussion of ideas, when done without pedantry, without excessive theorizing, without heaviness or aridity. It was the artist, not the philosopher, whom he admired in Plato, the portrayer of character, the writer of graceful dialogue, the stager of vivid, realistic scenes, the eloquent narrator of myths and allegories, the magnificently supple stylist, the humorist whose wit and fancy never failed.

This becomes very clear when one glances at his tribute to Plato, written in 1685 to accompany the translation of three dialogues by Maucroix (*OD*, 650-653). He felt that his *Avertissement* in defense of Plato was necessary in order to anticipate the "objections que les gens d'aujourd'hui lui pourront faire"—for the philosopher had gone out of style and was no longer widely appreciated. (Descartes was coming into vogue and the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns was just around the corner.) Courageously opposing the heresies of the younger generation La Fontaine proceeds to sketch, very briefly, Plato's importance in the history of philosophy and to explain, with some misgivings, how he instructs without reaching positive conclusions. Then, with greater relish, he describes Plato as an author of exquisite comedies, as a master of irony who combats the sophists with their own weapons, in a word as a great artist:

Parmi tout cela leur persécuteur sait mêler des grâces infinies. Les circonstances du dialogue, les caractères des personnages, les interlocutions et les bienséances, le style élégant et noble, et qui tient en quelque façon de la poésie: toutes ces choses s'y rencontrent en un tel degré d'excellence, que la manière de raisonner n'a plus rien qui choque: on se laisse amuser insensiblement comme par une espèce de charme.

In his eulogy of a skilful literary technician La Fontaine has picked on the very qualities which he himself possesses as an author of fables. The effect of Plato on his art—if effect there was—lay not in the realm of ideas but rather in the treatment of them, in the weaving of a spell about them. He has called this one of the guiding principles in the composition of his fables (VI, 1): "Une morale nue



apporte de l'ennui;/ Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui." His conviction that he must please in order to instruct—although this was a credo which every French classicist reiterated—was quite possibly intensified by his own delight in reading Plato's dialogues.

There is only one work, but a most substantial and enchanting one, where La Fontaine follows at all consciously in the footsteps of the ancient philosopher. In his novel, *Psyché*, the central story from Apuleius has many peripheral adornments: passages of poetry, descriptions of the gardens at Versailles, and the conversations of four friends whose identities have plagued historians of literature. As Gohin has noted, the opening scene, where the four friends are characterized and shown setting out to stroll and chat together, resembles the beginning of certain Platonic dialogues, *Phaedrus* in particular. Psyche's discussions with a hermit and two shepherd girls (*OD*, 192–210) also have a slight Platonic flavor, but this episode owes much to the conventions of pastoral and sentimental novels. La Fontaine of course comes closest to his Greek model in the debate among the four friends on the pleasure derived from tears and laughter, from tragedy and comedy (*OD*, 172–182). It cannot be doubted that this imitation is intentional, for the disputants keep alluding to ancient texts, including four different Platonic dialogues, and Gélaste, the gayest member of the group, agrees reluctantly to take part in the discussion "en philosophe platonicien." Throughout the scene the pattern of development follows Platonic lines but the arguments used seem to come mainly from other sources not yet clearly determined—a touch of Aristotle, some seventeenth-century critics, perhaps even the personal ideas of the four mysterious friends. The unevenness and variety of *Psyché*, indeed much of its charm, arises from the interplay of many tones, many artistic manners, many literary themes. One of its special qualities, an aura of meditation—fraternal, serious, yet ironic and tinged with humor—owes its presence to the nostalgic evocation of the Academy of Athens. Sainte-Beuve has rightly called this novel, along with *Adonis* and *Philémon et Baucis*, the most Hellenic among La Fontaine's works and in the literature of classical France.<sup>5</sup>

La Fontaine possessed in a rare degree the gift for feeling and reënacting the spirit of remote epochs. This was the key to his appreciation of Plato, as he himself recognized when writing his *Avertissement* for Maucroix. He utters twice the exhortation "Trans-

portons-nous en ce siècle-là" and, in order to make his uncultured readers visualize Plato's role in attacking the sophists, he keeps comparing the philosopher to a modern playwright or satirist, a sort of Molière intent on ridiculing "nos précieuses, nos marquis, nos entêtés" (*OD*, 652). Thanks to his ability to project himself across the centuries, always finding significant ties between the past and the present, La Fontaine became fascinated with the distant, misty figure of Homer.

From Plato to Homer, from the play of ideas to epic poetry, was a characteristic pirouette for La Fontaine. Not that one succeeded the other in his esteem. He read them both, and lighter authors too, according to his mood, starting as a young man and continuing all the rest of his life. In the days of the Table Ronde he may have read Homer in company with Pellisson, who has left a manuscript, dated 1650, which is partly a translation of, partly a commentary on, the *Odyssey*. La Fontaine begins making enthusiastic references to Homer in one of his earliest works, *Le Songe de Vaux*, and never ceases to do so: the ancient poet's name keeps occurring in the fables, in *Psyché*, in various poems and letters of the sixteen eighties. Louis Racine recalls that his father sometimes discussed Homer for La Fontaine's benefit and read passages aloud to him, in Latin translation. "Il n'était pas nécessaire de lui en faire sentir les beautés, il les saisissait: tout ce qui était beau le frappait." The beauty of Homer was, first of all, his antiquity. La Fontaine honored him as the patriarch of poets, the fountainhead from which all Greek and Latin literature flowed: "Homère n'est pas seulement le père des dieux, c'est aussi celui des bons poètes."<sup>6</sup> When speaking of ancient poets he is likely to say "Homère et les siens" (*Fables*, II, 13), or when alluding to Virgil, "Homère et son rival sont mes dieux du Parnasse" (*OD*, 646). As this line suggests, his attitude toward Homer (and Virgil) amounts almost to religious awe; he venerates them as the originators of all that is serious and great in poetry. There is a curious passage in his dedication of *Saint Malc* where he speaks of the majestic power of the Hebrew Scriptures as being even more elevated than Homer and Virgil (*OD*, 45). In one of his fables (II, 13) Homer appears again in a religious context, as La Fontaine compares the ancient idea of destiny or fatality with the Christian concept of providence. Like the prophet Baruch, whom he came across and read with ingenuous astonishment (according

to Louis Racine), Homer impressed him with a sort of Old Testament grandeur and remoteness.

Whenever he mentions Homer he is likely to add the name of Virgil in the same breath. The two were inseparable in his mind. A manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale reports that he, like Boileau, tended to rank Homer above Virgil—one being original and the other an imitator—but that, with characteristic independence, he found things to criticize even in Homer, notably the disproportion of certain descriptive passages. The Greek poet is sometimes too lengthy, at other times all too brief, as when speaking of the plague: "Homère n'aurait pas mal fait de la décrire, et mieux fait . . . que de nous donner un livre de ce qui était gravé sur le bouclier d'Achille." An impression of Homeric verbosity is also suggested by the lines to Pellisson in *Le Songe de Vaux*: "Homère épand toujours ses dons avec largesse;/ Virgile à ses trésors sait joindre la sagesse" (OD, 82). This rather superficial distinction between the two poets, this tendency to regard Homer as an older, more primitive, less polished Virgil, came about quite naturally since La Fontaine knew the Greek epics only in Latin translation. His knowledge of Homer had other limitations too. He rarely referred to the *Odyssey* and only in rather vague terms, except that, very late in his life, he went to it for material for the fable *Les Compagnons d'Ulysse* (XII, 1) and for the scene in Hades evoked in the ringing final line of *Daphnis et Alcimadure* (XII, 24): Non plus qu'Ajax Ulysse, et Didon son perfide. On the other hand he frequently expressed his appreciation for the *Iliad* and liked to allude to specific incidents or scenes. Most of all, perhaps, he enjoyed citing the richly evocative names of Greek or Trojan warriors and tagging them with a Homeric epithet, as in this defense of the powers of poetry, uttered by Calliopée in *Le Songe de Vaux*:

On ne lit point Homère,  
Sans que tantôt Achille à l'âme si colère,  
Tantôt Agamemnon au front majestueux,  
Le bien-disant Ulysse, Ajax l'impétueux,  
Et maint autre héros offre aux yeux son image.  
Je les fais tous parler. . . . (OD, 92; cf. *Fables*, II, 1).

In La Fontaine's eyes the *Iliad* epitomized everything heroic in epic literature; and the chief figure of the *Iliad*, Achilles, outshone all the other legendary heroes of the Trojan war.

Not only did he never tire of mentioning the exploits of Achilles; he even undertook, around 1680 or a little later, to write a tragedy about him. This unhappy effort never came to fruition. La Fontaine wrote only the first two acts of his tragedy and even these did not reach a final form. They have survived in a manuscript whose many variants attest the great amount of gallant but misguided labor which he devoted to his *Achille*. The play has certain good features—some energetic speeches by Ulysses and Ajax, a touching scene between Achilles and the old retainer, Phoenix—but on the whole La Fontaine seems quite unsure of himself. He keeps relying hopefully on devices and themes which had been exploited successfully by Corneille and Racine, both of whom contribute much to the pattern of his tragedy.<sup>8</sup> The essentials of his plot are of course taken from Homer. His intention was to dramatize the core of the *Iliad*: Achilles' vow not to join in battle against the Trojans, the death of his friend Patroclus, which he would presumably avenge, only to meet his own doom. It is interesting to see how La Fontaine visualized epic poems in terms of tragic situations. He paid less attention to the deeds of adventure and combat than to the emotional struggles of the main characters. In the *Aeneid* he was attracted above all by the intense passion of Dido, in the *Iliad* by the wrathful, impetuous, yet tender character of Achilles. His slowness to appreciate the *Odyssey* may perhaps be attributed to its looseness of structure, its lack of a central and powerful psychological conflict. In Homer's *Iliad*, as in Plutarch and Plato, he found the work of a great dramatic artist who could make the heights of human experience come alive to him.

It is no accident that La Fontaine is often called "the Homer of France," for he himself frequently suggested the incongruous comparison. The idea was born, perhaps, in the traditional coupling of Homer with Aesop, both more or less legendary and mysterious figures of deepest antiquity. La Fontaine often develops this parallel, for example in his introductory paragraph to the *Vie d'Esop* based on Planudes, where he calls Homer the father of poetry and Aesop the father of moral teaching. Several times in the fables he cites the two names together as masters of fiction:

Le doux charme de maint songe  
Par leur bel art inventé,  
Sous les habits du mensonge,  
Nous offre la vérité. (IX, 1)

At the beginning of this same fable La Fontaine reveals that he considered himself a sort of Aesop, only more poetic and elevated, more akin to Homer:

Grâce aux Filles de Mémoire  
J'ai chanté des animaux:  
Peut-être d'autres héros  
M'auraient acquis moins de gloire.  
Le loup en langue des dieux  
Parle au chien dans mes ouvrages. . . .

He had already expressed this feeling in the dedication of his first fables in 1668 (*Je chante les héros dont Ésope est le père*)—a feeling that his “ample comédie” possessed something epic in its scope and variety, something Homeric or Virgilian in its moments of lofty poetry. Without ever quite calling himself a national poet he somehow sensed his mission to represent everything characteristic and permanent in the genius of his race. Homer and Virgil, Greek and Latin literature at large, stand out among the most vital sources which nourished La Fontaine’s art, as indeed French culture itself.

His vision of Greek antiquity—Athens sometimes merging into Rome, the saga of Troy seen hazily through Latin texts, the meeting ground of gods and heroes, of mythology and history—may have lacked clarity and exactitude but it offered a rich and unfailing stimulus to his poetic faculties. The Hellenic world did not attract him primarily for its moral and political wisdom, as it did the humanists of the Renaissance. Nor did it exert its spell through its sun-drenched scenery or through its architecture and sculpture, as for so many poets of the nineteenth century. Archeology had not yet unburied Keats’s Grecian urn or Shelley’s “Temples and cities and immortal forms.”<sup>9</sup> La Fontaine approached antiquity only through its literature and the one city which fascinated him was Troy, the birthplace of ancient poems and myths:

Ilion, ton nom seul a des charmes pour moi;  
Lieu fécond en sujets propres à notre emploi,  
Ne verrai-je jamais rien de toi, ni la place  
De ces murs élevés et détruits par des dieux,  
Ni ces champs où couraient la Fureur et l’Audace,  
Ni des temps fabuleux enfin la moindre trace  
Qui pût me présenter l’image de ces lieux?<sup>10</sup>

As these yearning lines so well suggest, he dreamed of a distant, elusive realm, of the passions and struggles of mythological per-

sonages, of a mysterious, half-imaginary world from which so much great poetry had sprung. How eagerly he read these old legends and how much he thirsted to read more may be judged from his *Ode pour la paix*, in 1679, where he predicts a new Golden Age, a great rebirth of the fine arts, including translation:

Par l'ordre de Louis, cent traducteurs célèbres  
Tireront du sein des ténèbres  
Ce que Rome et la Grèce ont produit de plus beau:  
Homère et ses enfants, ressortis du tombeau,  
Vont éterniser votre empire. . . . (OD, 629).

Troy and its poet, Homer, ancient Greece as the primary source of all poetic beauty—these themes keep returning in La Fontaine's works. His dream of ages past, one of the imaginative inclinations which he indulged most often and most willingly, somehow enabled him to feel and reproduce the spirit of Greek literature.

This capacity sets him apart from the other writers of his century. During the Renaissance French authors had used Greek sources in an erudite, wholesale manner, seldom recapturing their original power and gracefulness. Then the sobering influence of Malherbe and his followers, who disapproved of Greek literature, had steered French letters closer to Latin models, to ideals of clarity, polished precision, and prosaic restraint, ideals which were maintained very advantageously throughout most of the classical period. In literary manuals it has become a long-accepted custom to classify La Fontaine as an "independent," an exception to the general rule. The uniqueness of his personality and of his art is doubtless the product of many immeasurable factors but it seems to arise, in no small degree, from his sympathetic feeling for Homer, Plato, and Plutarch, and his conscious or unconscious imitation of them. Sainte-Beuve, with his usual insight, sensed this when he called La Fontaine more Greek than any of the other French classical writers, even than Racine: "Mais La Fontaine, sans y songer, était alors bien plus grec que tous, de sentiment et de génie."

His Greek qualities, not always distinguishable from his Latin ones, give life and color to his moral views, endowing them with a certain humaneness or humanity. He teaches not merely fortitude, prudence, temperance, but also justice, compassion, the value of freedom, the joys of friendship and the pleasures of sociability. He takes a pagan delight in all that pertains to man or woman and

will find in the beauty of the human body a perennial source of inspiration. He has learned much from Latin refinement, but he dares to be gay, personal, lyrical, even intentionally negligent. He often aspires to lofty eloquence, yet continually reverts to clear-eyed, sanely realistic writing. Perhaps his own formula "... la grâce plus belle encore que la beauté," best summarizes his Greek inheritance: a sensitive preference for graceful, natural charm over beauty that is cold and impersonal. Looking back over some of his works, particularly *Adonis* and *Psyché*, one feels that—despite their Latin sources, despite their defects of order and organization—they excel by virtue of a certain ironic tenderness and warmth which seem to stem from ancient Greece.

But of course his humanism and his zest for life bring him close not only to Greek authors but also to earlier centuries in France, above all to the literature of the sixteenth century. A man of the Renaissance, but with greater delicacy and taste, La Fontaine saw reflections of himself in many mirrors. Certain tendencies of his mind found sustenance not merely in Plato and Plutarch but closer to home in Marot, in Montaigne, in the poets of the Pléiade. The "Attic salt" which Fénelon attributed to him has a flavor very similar to the Gallic variety; they cannot be chemically separated and reduced to a pure form. Often when La Fontaine appears most Greek—as in his *Adonis* or in his *Amour mouillé* taken from Anacreon—he is also paying his respects to the French poets who preceded him.

### CHAPTER III

## Poetry, Romance, and the Gardens of Vaux

### 1. *The Illusion of Vaux.*

THE seven or eight years between the presentation of *Adonis* to Fouquet and the publication of the first *Contes et nouvelles en vers* in 1665-66 can be divided into two successive but strongly contrasting periods where La Fontaine appears to set out in one direction, then turn around and go the opposite way. While basking in the luxury of Saint-Mandé and Vaux his sources of inspiration and his own poetic compositions are generally works of imaginative elegance and artificiality. Then, after the collapse of the financier's house of cards in 1661, an abrupt and cruel awakening, he will make a new start, this time attracted to literature in the realistic, satirical tradition. These two tendencies of course touch and overlap at many points—he could read D'Urfé and Rabelais in the same afternoon, he could mix precious mythology with sharply observed details of daily life—but they stand out with sufficient clearness to be called separate stages in his artistic growth. In a way, they will combine and culminate in his fables, where scenes which are fanciful yet truthful take place in a half-imaginary, half-real world.

La Fontaine made frequent visits to Vaux, particularly in the years 1659 to 1661, and must have felt as though he were stepping into the pages of a novel. What a revelation this must have been, what a change from his middle-class surroundings in Château-Thierry and his little escapades in bohemian literary circles in Paris! At Vaux he caught glimpses of celebrated people, of the wealthiest families in France, of the highest aristocracy, and in an atmosphere of miraculous beauty. Here was a new and stately palace, lavishly furnished and adorned with the works of famous artists, shining forth in an Arcadian setting of groves, gardens, fountains, and spacious lawns—precisely like some tableau in an epic poem or heroic romance. Indeed, a description of Vaux, a sort of parallel to La Fontaine's own *Songe de Vaux*, provided part of



the material for the final volume of Mlle de Scudéry's *Clélie*.<sup>1</sup> Here one may find an account of the castle and grounds, thinly disguised under the name Valterre, along with eulogies to Fouquet (Cléonime) and detailed information on certain of the paintings by Le Brun (Méléandre). The episode, which must have pleased many readers—perhaps as much as the *Carte de Tendre* in the same novel—does not seem at all out of place in this romance, a tissue of heroism and gallantry in the traditional opulent wonderland of adventure fiction.

La Fontaine always loved novels and began reading them very early in his life but they may have suited his mood best of all in the years when he fixed his hopes on Fouquet. In connection with *Le Songe de Vaux* he mentions the still-famous *Roman de la Rose*, which he may have known in the modernized version by Marot, and an Italian romance which had been translated in the middle of the sixteenth century (OD, 77). Many of his readings are listed in a *Ballade* (OD, 585–586), the one with the refrain “Je me plais aux livres d’amour,” which he wrote no later than 1664 and quite possibly some years earlier for the pleasure of Fouquet. He alludes, gracefully and knowingly, to translations of Greek romances and to the knightly literature of the waning Middle Ages, available in sixteenth-century editions (*Amadis de Gaula*, presumably in the translation by Herberay des Essarts, and *Perceval le Gallois*). To this might be added his quotation, in a fable, from *Merlin* (IV, 11). Of course his taste is not exceptional; medieval fiction enjoyed a sporadic revival in the seventeenth century, as can be seen in Chaplain's dialogue on *Lancelot* or the one by Sarasin which discusses *Perceforest*; but only *Amadis* was still widely read. *Amadis* must have been one of La Fontaine's great favorites, for he keeps citing incidents and characters from it, in *Clymène*, in *Psyché*, in his tales. The *Ballade* does not reveal his attitude toward Cervantes—he merely exclaims “Cervantes me ravit”—but he dwells affectionately on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. Tasso, whom he also admired, is not mentioned among his “livres d’amour” but could very well have been, in accordance with the seventeenth-century habit of grouping novels and epic or chivalric poems in a single literary genre. Finally, among his contemporaries, he has an enthusiastic word for novels by Gomberville, Saint-Sorlin, La Calprenède, and Georges and Madeleine de Scudéry. If his remarks can be taken literally he not only

had an encyclopedic knowledge of imaginative fiction but returned to certain works and read them time and time again. Perhaps some of the gaps in his life, some of the unproductive years, were filled by his lazy perusal of the thousands of pages of *Polexandre* or *Le Grand Cyrus*. The time was not wasted, as he would have been the first to point out. There is a passage in *Psyché* where he intervenes and very seriously urges that girls be allowed to read novels for a safe and wholesome education in the arts of love:

Nos mères de maintenant . . . défendent à leurs filles cette lecture pour les empêcher de savoir ce que c'est qu'amour; en quoi je tiens qu'elles ont tort; et cela est même inutile, la Nature servant d'*Astrée*. . . Il est de l'amour comme du jeu; c'est prudemment fait que d'en apprendre toutes les ruses, non pas pour les pratiquer, mais afin de s'en garantir. Si jamais vous avez des filles, laissez-les lire. (OD, 203-204)

La Fontaine did not rely on novels to learn about love, but they offered the best possible preparation in the rules of refined politeness and gallantry and undoubtedly helped to place him at his ease in the fashionable gatherings at Vaux.

This was not the only occasion, in *Psyché*, when *L'Astrée* preyed upon his mind. Honoré D'Urfé's novel seems to have inspired certain pastoral episodes and also the discussions of love which the various characters are prone to engage in. *L'Astrée* surpassed all other novels in La Fontaine's esteem, no doubt because of its easy-flowing naturalness and charm, its bits of pleasant poetry, its verdant scenery, most of all its humorous element provided by the unpastoral love affairs of Hylas. D'Urfé's romance never failed to hold his interest, as he says in his *Ballade*: "Étant petit garçon je lisais son roman,/ Et je le lis encore ayant la barbe grise." These exaggerated words turned out to be prophetic. In 1678 he evoked sweet memories of *L'Astrée* in some lines for a ballet (OD, 625-626), and then again, at the age of seventy, ever hopeful of winning success in the theater, he evolved from D'Urfé the libretto of his *Astrée, tragédie lyrique*.

It has been said, by D'Olivet, that La Fontaine drew from *L'Astrée* the "images champêtres" for his poetry. The expression is rather vague but seems to refer to La Fontaine's sketching of rural scenes and landscapes, for which he has a gift quite comparable to that of D'Urfé. At least there are features of similarity in the regional surroundings which the two authors tend to reproduce—Forez in one case, Champagne and the Ile de France in

the other—and possibly La Fontaine's impressions of nature were deepened by his enjoyment of *L'Astrée*. But in a larger sense his reading gave him food for reverie and allowed him to wander through a poetic world where peace and beauty reigned. The conventions of bucolic literature held the same fascination for La Fontaine as did the myths of ancient gods and goddesses. Repeatedly, not only in *Psyché*, but in certain fables (e.g. II, 1, VIII, 13), in an eclogue (*OD*, 738–741), in *Clymène*, in *Saint Malc* he would indulge his taste for relating the idyllic love affairs of imaginary shepherds or shepherdesses. In *Le Songe de Vaux* many a passage suggests that he saw a sort of pastoral paradise in the gardens of Le Nôtre, as though courtiers and ladies were playing at love with all the elaborate make-believe of D'Urfé's aristocratic nymphs and herdsmen.

During the years of his service to Fouquet La Fontaine must have become very conscious of changing styles in poetry. For a literary era had come to end. During his youth he had doubtless read and admired the elegant poetry of Malherbe's followers on the one hand—the satiric thrusts of Maynard and the rustic melodies of Racan—and on the other hand the more vivid and realistic works of irregular or “baroque” poets such as Théophile and Tristan l'Hermite. In the sixteen fifties these currents were giving way to others which would have a marked effect on La Fontaine's writings. Many poets were composing serious epics on historical, patriotic, or religious themes. The example of Saint-Amant, of Scudéry, of Chapelain, of Saint-Sorlin, among others, must have guided La Fontaine in *Adonis* and the more solemn fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux*. Secondly, following in the wake of Voiture, a host of less ambitious poets—such as Sarasin, Segrais and Benserade—were cultivating lighter genres tinged with preciousness, aimed at a feminine or highly fashionable audience. Their influence will be apparent in the bits of verse comprising La Fontaine's “pension poétique.” He has stepped far outside the orbit of the “Table Ronde” and, thanks largely to his contacts at Vaux, has plunged into the main currents of the literary world.

Not that he forgot his old friends or left them all behind. He remained on intimate terms with Furetière and Tallemant des Réaux. Among the older generation, Gombault and Ménage may have crossed his path at Vaux, Conrart stayed in touch with him (writing him an extremely complimentary letter in 1660), and Chapelain's

laborious failure as an epic poet did not keep La Fontaine from paying his respects to this very influential personnage (*OD*, 540). Pellisson had preceded him to Vaux and helped open the gates for him, and their mutual friend, Maucroix, found time to combine his clerical duties with secret errands in Rome for the finance minister. But, at the same time, La Fontaine came in contact with a galaxy of other writers to whom Fouquet offered hospitality, encouragement, or remuneration. The two Corneilles, Molière, Brébeuf, Saint-Evremond, Scarron, Mlle de Scudéry, Charles Perrault—to name only some of the most probable ones—became acquainted with La Fontaine and watched his rise in favor at Vaux and his struggles to make a start as a man of letters.

While meeting professional writers (and painters, sculptors, architects, and gardeners, hard at work on the embellishment of Fouquet's palace) he also climbed a step in the social scale and acquired a certain familiarity, at least a gracefully deferential manner, with noble and wealthy people. First at Château-Thierry, then at Vaux, and eventually in circles close to Louis XIV, his amiability quickly installed him in the good graces of distinguished persons who could help to advance his career, such as Mme d'Hervart, Brienne, and the various members of the Bouillon and Conti families. Perhaps his fondest wish was to gain admission to the literary aristocracy, the close little group around La Rochefoucauld who combined the bluest of blood with a passionate interest in creative art and a superlative talent for writing. Along with La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Sévigné and Mme de La Fayette sometimes appeared at Vaux and, either there or at certain salons in Paris, soon came to know La Fontaine and to admire his poetry. One of his first compositions shown to Fouquet, the rollicking *Épître* for the notorious abbess of Mouzon (*OD*, 492-494), was brought to the attention of Mme de Sévigné, who found it enchanting. La Fontaine sent her a stanza (*OD*, 494) to thank her for her appreciation and, some years later, knew her well enough to dedicate a fable (*IV*, 1) to her daughter. The charming letter-writer, who had so much in common with La Fontaine as a humorous yet emotional observer of life, eventually counted him among her favorite authors and quoted constantly from his fables. His relations with Mme de La Fayette are more obscure but it may have been as early as 1660 that he sent her a small billiard table accompanied by some gallant

compliments in verse (*OD*, 736-737). Her devoted friend, La Rochefoucauld, inspired one of La Fontaine's early fables (*I*, 11), a delicate tribute to the *Maximes* as a mirror of mankind, and later came close enough to the poet to influence his thought and color it with a certain misanthropy (Cf. *Fables*, *X*, 14). Thus all three members of this famous trio esteemed him and accepted offerings in verse from him. They may have considered him socially inferior—for there is no evidence to show that they treated him with any intimacy or received him at their houses—but they at least respected him as an artist, and while his career was still unfolding. La Fontaine's greatest debt to Fouquet lay in all these contacts with prominent people in literature and high society. His confidence grew and at the same time he gained a sympathetic audience. A few years later, when ready to start publishing his tales and fables, his success would be virtually guaranteed.

Much idle speculation has been devoted to the question of how the glitter of Vaux influenced La Fontaine, whether for good or bad, and how it might have affected his development if it had lasted longer. Nothing could be more uncertain than Sainte-Beuve's theory that, without Fouquet's fall from glory, La Fontaine might have written the tales but not the fables, and that he needed guidance on a higher plane, notably from Boileau, in order to discover his best potentialities.<sup>2</sup> All that can be said, with any sureness, is that Fouquet opened dazzling new horizons to him, greatly enriched his experience, and facilitated his beginnings in a most difficult profession. It should be borne in mind that La Fontaine never let illusions blind him to the stern realities of life, that while visiting Vaux he continued to spend most of his time in Château-Thierry and Paris, that he maintained his friendships in other circles and was already on close terms with Racine and perhaps with Boileau, and finally that he was a most independent spirit who always seemed to be able to take from his surroundings precisely what he needed. The brilliance of Vaux, had it continued, could scarcely have done him any permanent damage, any more than the scientific atmosphere prevailing at the home of Mme de La Sablière. His first fables might have been more precious, as his later ones are more philosophical, but he would never have lost sight of his mission as a poet.

2. *From Villon to Voiture—the “Pension Poétique.”*

Among the poets who vied in honoring Fouquet La Fontaine soon gained a special position, becoming a friend of the family and a sort of beloved court jester whose company was always welcome. How well his protector paid him for his services is not known but, by the spring of 1659, he seems to have begun receiving a regular pension in quarterly installments. Or, as the poet ingeniously expressed it (OD, 495-496), he began paying the financier a pension, a pension in verse, formally contracting to offer him four poems a year: a madrigal each summer, some “*menus vers*” in October, a *ballade* on New Year’s Day, possibly a devotional sonnet at Easter. Without adhering strictly to this plan (for if he wrote any pious sonnets they have not survived), La Fontaine produced a score or more of light poems—madrigals, *épîtres*, *ballades*—to compliment and amuse Fouquet. Nothing could have pleased Fouquet more; he loved witticisms in verse, such as epigrams, enigmas, *bouts rimés*, and even composed some lines himself from time to time. These pieces by La Fontaine, usually known as his “*pension poétique*,” show the author in a new light as a graceful courtier and almost a professional entertainer. But even here, when he gaily improvises and turns his back on Plato and Virgil, he has worthy literary models to guide him; he frankly and consciously follows the long French tradition of humorous, fanciful, personal poetry.

Among his poems which seem to date from the Vaux period and which may have formed part of the “*pension poétique*” there are three—published successively in 1665, 1671, and 1674—in which his manner is openly imitative and motivated by a desire to recapture the flavor of the late Middle Ages. The first of these, *Imitation d’un livre intitulé “Les Arrêts d’amour”* (by the fifteenth-century poet, Martial d’Auvergne), evokes an amorous tribunal, with a lover’s complaint and his mistress’s rebuttal drawn up in legal jargon (OD, 584-585). Very similar in spirit, *Le Différend de Beaux Yeux et de Belle Bouche* (OD, 593-595) sets forth another sentimental debate, although this time the direct source is *précieux* rather than medieval: a seventeenth-century dialogue usually attributed to Charles Sorel. Finally, *Janot et Catin* (OD, 607-610), one of La Fontaine’s very few pieces in sustained archaic style, follows very closely the pattern of a *blason* by another poet of the fifteenth

century, Guillaume Alexis. All three poems take the form of a dialogue or argument, a scheme which La Fontaine may have borne in mind, inadvertently, when writing some of his more serious compositions, notably *Clymène* and some sections of *Le Songe de Vaux*. It is not surprising that he should ferret out these obscure models. While the manuscript literature of the early Middle Ages had largely disappeared from circulation, the invention of printing had saved many fifteenth-century authors from oblivion. In seeking them out La Fontaine not only indulged his taste for reading old books but kept in step with one of the fashions of his day.

It is well-known that, in the sixteen thirties and forties, the salon poets made a game of reviving old-fashioned lyrical genres and colorful archaic vocabulary. If they sometimes delved into fifteenth-century authors, their usual source of old words and old verse patterns was Marot. They perhaps did not realize that, in imitating him, they were going beyond the Renaissance to the culture handed down from the Middle Ages. As a general rule seventeenth-century authors professed nothing but scorn for medieval poetry, with the exception of the *Roman de la Rose* and possibly the works of François Villon, both of which had been edited by Marot and are everywhere reflected in his own writing. With Marot bridging the gap between two epochs, then resuscitated a hundred years later by Voiture, it is almost impossible to sort out the medieval elements in La Fontaine's poetry and to determine from where he derives them.

He had some knowledge, at least, of Villon, one of the latest and greatest of medieval poets. Although there had been no edition of Villon since 1542 he seems to have influenced some of the libertine poets around Théophile and certain satirical tendencies in Mathurin Régnier. Two scholars, Patru and Colletet, read Villon and praised him; and both of them were good friends of La Fontaine. Boileau, another friend, gave Villon his stamp of approval in the *Art poétique*, but with a curiously irrelevant comment which betrays his ignorance of medieval literature: "Villon sut le premier, dans ces siècles grossiers,/ Débrouiller l'art confus de nos vieux romanciers." In La Fontaine's tales and fables, along with expressions which may perhaps have come from Villon, there is one verbatim reminiscence (*Contes*, I, 11) which could probably not have been found anywhere else: the words "Haro! la gorge m'ard!" borrowed from the "Ballade et oraison" in *Le Grand Testament*. Thus he seems to have seen the

original text and it has become the custom, among commentators on either Villon or La Fontaine, to say that Villon was one of his favorite poets and one of those who most influenced his art.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in his many remarks on the mentors he has chosen, he not only fails to acknowledge any interest in Villon but twice condemns medieval poetry as unintelligible to modern ears—once in the preface to his fables in 1668 and again in *Clymène* where he names Marot as the oldest French poet worth imitating:

Au reste, n'allez pas chercher ce style antique  
Dont à peine les mots s'entendent aujourd'hui:  
Montez jusqu'à Marot et point par delà lui.<sup>2</sup>

This refusal to recognize the merits of poetry dating from earlier than the sixteenth century suggests that La Fontaine may have drawn no more from Villon than he did from Martial d'Auvergne and Guillaume Alexis. The works of Villon were not unknown to him, perhaps he even admired them, but he must have found their language obsolete and hard to read. He dipped into them enough to retain a few lines or phrases which were picturesque yet still understandable, but he never imitated Villon at all consciously or consecutively. If he seems to resemble Villon at times—in language, in the choice of certain genres, in intimacy, in flashes of sarcastic humor—this comes about primarily from the intervention of a third party, Marot, who belongs to Villon's lineage and is one of La Fontaine's most cherished teachers.

It was inevitable that he should be drawn to Marot who in seventeenth-century France received acclaim from critics and writers of every complexion, eclipsing Ronsard and the other poets of the Renaissance. Three editions of Marot's works were published in the first 15 years of the seventeenth century; then, a few decades later, Voiture seized on him and made him ultra-fashionable; and in the sixteen sixties he still enjoyed a wide following. Boileau had nothing but praise for Marot's "élégant badinage." Mme de Sévigné admired his "naïveté"—a word which implied naturalness and sincerity as well as ingenuousness—and she sometimes quoted from his poetry in her letters. But one suspects that most people relished him for a certain old-fashioned quaintness and charm. Few, probably, read him as appreciatively or as understandingly as did La Fontaine, finding in him a vitality and warmth which answered to his own



instincts. He likes to embroider on lines by Marot, for example when he is drawing up a playful horoscope to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of François-Louis de Conti (*OD*, 695–696), and apt quotations from Marot come quickly to his mind, as in one of the letters written during his journey to Limoges (*OD*, 550). In 1674, when the great old soldier, Turenne, was setting out for one of his final campaigns, the poet rode along with him for a few miles and discovered that the general, like himself, was a lover of Marot and knew some of his poems by heart—a rare talent indeed among military men:

Ils savent déconfire,  
Brûler, raser, exterminer, détruire;  
Mais qu'on m'en montre un qui sache Marot.  
Vous souvient-il, Seigneur, que mot pour mot,  
"Mes créanciers qui de dizains n'ont cure,"  
"Frère Lubin," et mainte autre écriture,  
Me fut par vous récitée en chemin? (*OD*, 578)

It is easy to see why Turenne was fond of La Fontaine and liked to receive letters in verse from him; here was a poet whose engaging personality and humorous style awakened memories of his old favorite, Marot.

The two poets of course had many traits in common. Their provincial background kept both of them in touch with common people and popular tastes, just as their experience as hangers-on in courtly circles made it easy for them to turn out gracious compliments and gallantries. They are both independent, rather peace-loving and gentle, a little irresponsible, frequently in love, beset with financial worries, yet lighthearted and inclined to make fun of their troubles. They are both keen observers of life and they tend to report what they see ironically, wittily, dramatically. They succeed best in shorter genres where they can speak personally and amusingly, for their art is gracefully inventive rather than profoundly original or imaginative. Marot is perhaps more intense, more spontaneous, and La Fontaine more discreet, more reserved, more delicate. The former has a greater gift for personal lyricism, the latter has a wider range of interests and emotions. La Fontaine's resemblance to Marot could not have escaped his notice, particularly in the days when he played the part of official poet for Fouquet.

There is little doubt that it was Marot who inspired the idea of

the "pension poétique." La Fontaine's *épître* which begins: "Je vous l'avoue, et c'est la vérité," the one in which he drafts the contract for his quarterly contributions (*OD*, 495-496), is not only "marotic" in its familiar, conversational style, but enlarges on a theme—the poet who pays his protector—which Marot had employed in one of his most famous epistles, *Au roi, pour avoir été dérobé*. Just as Marot named certain friends as bondsmen:

Pour vous payer les deux princes Lorrains  
Me plègeront. . .

La Fontaine says that Pellisson can guarantee his contract:

Même au besoin notre ami Pellisson  
Me pleigera d'un couplet de chanson.

These similarities suggest that the poet remembered Marot and conceived his own role in Fouquet's household to be like that of his predecessor at the court of Francis I. It was only natural that his donations in verse should be cast in certain forms or genres where Marot had excelled—various kinds of short pieces such as epigrams and *dizains*, four *ballades* (including the one in *Clymène* which is a declared imitation of Marot), and several *épîtres*.

The *épître*, a vehicle which Marot had perfected as his personal speciality, exerted a particularly far-reaching influence on the poetry of La Fontaine. His epistle written to complain that Fouquet has kept him waiting for an hour in some antechamber demonstrates his easy handling of this chatty, familiar genre. It begins:

Dussé-je une fois vous déplaire,  
Seigneur, je ne me saurais taire.  
Celui qui, plein d'affection,  
Vous promet une pension  
Bien payable et bien assignée  
A tous les quartiers de l'année;  
Qui, pour tenir ce qu'il promet,  
Va souvent au sacré Sommet . . .  
Celui-là, dis-je, a contre vous  
Un juste sujet de courroux. (*OD*, 503-504)

Then, like Marot, while pretending to voice a grievance, the poet contrives to compliment Fouquet, intimately and amusingly, on his importance as a statesman and his taste as a collector of Egyptian antiquities. Perhaps his best epistle of this period—and the most

marotic because of his appeal's desperate urgency which its playful manner only half conceals—is the plea addressed to the Duke of Bouillon in 1662 when La Fontaine stood in danger of paying a heavy fine for having misrepresented himself as an “écuyer” in certain legal papers. He argues that he merely committed an oversight and signed the documents without reading them: “Et lisez-vous tout ce qu'on vous apporte?/ J'aurais signé ma mort de même sorte” (*OD*, 571). One of Marot's verse letters, the *Épître a son amy Lyon Jamet* contains a delightful rendering of a fable by Aesop, the story of the trapped lion who is rescued by a rat. La Fontaine's version of the fable (*II*, 11) has various sources but seems to take one or two details from the *épître* by Marot, which he could scarcely have failed to read. Quite possibly Marot helped to kindle his interest in Aesop and to show him some of the poetic potentialities of fable-writing. The spirit of Marot's epistles can also be felt in certain letters where prose and verse are mingled and in the preambles so often attached to tales and fables. In later life not only gay epistles but serious ones (like the *Épître à Huet*) and even philosophical *discours* (to La Rochefoucauld, to Mme de La Sablière, etc.) reveal some traces of Marot's manner, but enlarged and transformed by a poet of the greatest versatility.

Of course it was not merely a genre, but rather a poetic style, which La Fontaine admired in Marot and sought to revive or imitate. This point has been emphasized, very properly, by the Abbé D'Olivet:

Mais de tous les modèles qu'il se proposa, Marot est celui dont il retint le plus, quant au style. J'entends ici par style, un choix de certaines expressions, et plus particulièrement encore de certains tours. Or Marot ayant le premier attrapé le vrai tour du genre naïf, il [La Fontaine] a été censé depuis avoir déterminé le point de perfection, où notre langue pouvait être portée dans le genre naïf. Jusque-là qu'aujourd'hui encore, malgré tous les changements arrivés dans le français, le style marotique fait parmi nous, comme une langue à part, dans laquelle notre oreille est faite à sentir des finesses et des agréments que l'on ne saurait lui remplacer dans un autre style.<sup>3</sup>

As D'Olivet implies, without perhaps making it entirely clear, “le style marotique” of La Fontaine does not reproduce the idiom which prevailed in the times of Marot but employs a limited number of old expressions to create a familiar, comic effect. It will be seen that

La Fontaine wrote only two or three *Contes* in sustained archaic language. In many of his other tales, as in some of his fables, he introduced old words, but rather sparingly and only ones which could be easily understood by his contemporaries. Also, his "style marotique" is achieved less through vocabulary than through features of syntax and versification: suppression of subject pronouns, omission of connectives, inverted phrases, and a calculated carelessness in observing the rules of rhythm and rhyme. The result of this technique is a sort of folk-French, colloquial and provincial as much as it is old-fashioned, which suggests the style and manner of Marot but without resembling them at all closely. Thus La Fontaine, instead of copying Marot and other sixteenth-century poets, tried to discover and appropriate the secrets of their art. He imitated them deliberately but cautiously, never forgetting his own talents or the tastes of his own age. His intentions are best explained in the preface to Part II of the *Contes* (1666), where he defends his metrical freedom against various critics, calling it legitimate and and necessary in the kind of light verse he is undertaking. He even attacks the "récits aussi froids que beaux," the "contraintes fort inutiles," the excessive perfectionism, as dangerous tendencies of contemporary poetry. He invites the reader to consider the careful regularity of modern epigrams: "peut-être y trouvera-t-on beaucoup moins de sel, j'oserais dire encore bien moins de grâces, qu'en celles de Marot et de Saint-Gelais."

This curious preface has to be weighed rather delicately. In proposing a theory of literary negligence La Fontaine perhaps takes a false position in order to justify as strongly as possible his methods in the *Contes*. It would be a mistake to call him an adversary of classicism or a hater of rules or a poet willing to excuse low standards of craftsmanship. Rather, as an artist of wide tastes, sensitive to the beauties of every literary style, he seems to regret the narrowing horizons of the sixteen sixties. He could and did appreciate tragedies and epic poems, the polished satires of Boileau, the sermons of Bossuet or Bourdaloue, but he felt that room should be made for literature in a lighter and more natural vein. In the personal, popular, witty poetry of Marot he saw a healthy and invigorating antidote for the extreme classicism to which his age aspired. Marot (and of course Saint-Gelais and others) breathe life into all the tales and fables, taking their place quite magically beside Virgil and

Horace. In breeding these strains together, in developing an art based on subtle, amusing contrasts, La Fontaine may have risked the disdain of rule-loving critics; Patru thought the fables should have been written in prose and Boileau failed to mention them in his *Art poétique*. But he sensed very accurately the tastes of the public. The fables, and more secretly the tales, won their way immediately to the heart of almost every reader.

La Fontaine's indebtedness to Marot is complicated by the fact that he felt himself to be following in the footsteps of Vincent Voiture. The poet of the *hôtel de Rambouillet* had appropriated Marot as a model, had revived such genres as the *ballade* and the *rondeau*, and had even written some letters and verse in "vieux langage" for the amusement of his aristocratic friends. Most seventeenth-century critics called him a second Marot and found him every bit as good as his predecessor. La Fontaine, like everyone else, frequently associated the two names. In the preface mentioned above he defended his imitation of Marot's familiar, "careless" style by citing the example of Voiture: "Feu M. de Voiture en est le garant: il ne faut que lire ceux de ses ouvrages où il fait revivre le caractère de Marot." Again, in *Clymène*, he notes that Voiture and Marot ("maître Clément") are similarly talented for composing humorous, frothy trifles:

... ce qu'en français on nomme bagatelle,  
Un jeu dont je voudrais Voiture pour modèle:  
Il excelle en cet art. Maître Clément et lui  
S'y prenaient beaucoup mieux que nos gens d'aujourd'hui. (OD, 37)

The same poets are mentioned once again (this time along with Rabelais) in a letter where La Fontaine acknowledges some of the sources of the lighter features of his art.

J'ai profité dans Voiture;  
Et Marot par sa lecture  
M'a fort aidé, j'en conviens. (OD, 672)

All this is rather surprising. Apparently La Fontaine saw no great difference between the humorous manner of Marot—which is still pungent and refreshing—and the imitations of Marot by a clever but exceedingly superficial poet who has come to represent the worst tendencies of *préciosité*.

He was not alone in this error, for the prestige of Voiture knew no

bounds. Everyone, Boileau included, praised Voiture and considered him the unchallenged master of light, graceful poetry. Whenever La Fontaine happened to speak of the greatest poets of his own century he unhesitatingly picked Malherbe and Voiture as the only artists who, each in his own manner, had attained a high degree of perfection. What he admired and envied most in these two quite dissimilar poets was their ability to flatter and eulogize distinguished personages, one in solemn style and the other in bantering witticisms. This is clearly indicated in a passage in *Clymène*, where Apollo invites one of the Muses to recite for him:

Votre tour est venu, Calliope: essayez  
 Un de ces deux chemins qu'aux auteurs ont frayés  
 Deux écrivains fameux; je veux dire Malherbe,  
 Qui louait ses héros en un style superbe;  
 Et puis maître Vincent, qui même aurait loué  
 Proserpine et Pluton en un style enjoué. (OD, 32)

The same attitude is to be seen in a letter to François-Louis de Conti, whose merits, according to La Fontaine, could be celebrated adequately only by a Malherbe or a Voiture (OD, 712). The art of paying compliments—without which no man of letters could hope for success in seventeenth-century France—was always cultivated by La Fontaine and never more carefully than in the years when Fouquet was guiding his destinies. In the precious atmosphere of Vaux, where memories of Voiture and the *hôtel de Rambouillet* were still cherished, he very naturally considered himself one of Voiture's followers or disciples.

Thus "maître Clément" and "maître Vincent" provided a double inspiration, almost inextricably joined, for his playful pension in verse offered to Fouquet. His mixing of two manners, the archaic and the precious, can be observed in the "Ballade du seconde terme," written in compliance with a specific assignment, to imitate the famous *rondeau* by Voiture which begins:

Ma foi, c'est fait de moi. Car Ysabeau  
 M'a conjuré de lui faire un rondeau.  
 Cela me met en une peine extrême.  
 Quoi! treize vers, huit en -eau, cinq en -ème!

This time-honored game (which Voiture had of course not invented) consists in composing a piece which illustrates some genre and at the

same time discusses the metrical scheme involved in it. La Fontaine starts by defining his task (Trois foix dix vers, et puis cinq d'ajoutés), dwells on the difficulties confronting him, and then, to fill out his 35 lines, allows himself to stray from his subject. Unlike his model, which contained nothing particularly old-fashioned, he introduces an anecdote in the spirit of Marot's epigrams:

Colin, venant des Universités,  
 Promit un jour cent francs à Guillemette;  
 De quatre-vingts il trompa la fillette . . . (OD, 498)

This leads up to his chosen refrain (Promettre est un, et tenir est un autre) which may be either an old proverbial expression or a reminiscence that goes back to the poetry of Clément Marot's father.<sup>4</sup> Neither here nor elsewhere does La Fontaine seem to imitate Voiture at all faithfully. He may have acquired from Voiture a certain delicate ingenuity, perhaps a fashionable elegance or "honnêteté précieuse," but his roots went deeper and—whether he thought so or not—Voiture served him mainly as a gateway to the rich poetic heritage of the early sixteenth century.

Among the gallant poets of the salons there is one, Sarasin—far more talented than Voiture but not so celebrated in his own age—whom La Fontaine sometimes resembles rather closely. Often considered simply a rival or successor to Voiture, Sarasin also cultivated old genres and outmoded language and specialized in teasing flattery. But he possessed a wider culture, liked to translate Latin literature, had La Fontaine's fondness for ancient mythology, and could write serious poetry as well as light, or mix the two manners effectively and pleasingly. Sarasin died in 1654, only six years after Voiture, but his works were frequently reprinted, appearing in three editions in the years 1656 to 1663. La Fontaine may perhaps have known him personally, through Pellisson, but never expressed any admiration for his poetry, thinking always of Voiture as the archetype of humorous verse. On the other hand, his one allusion to Sarasin, in *Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard* (OD, 351), reveals an awareness of Sarasin's flirtations and a familiarity with some stanzas he had written. It is possible that the animal games of *précieux* authors—Voiture's still-famous letter *De la carpe au brochet* or Sarasin's poem, *La Souris*,<sup>5</sup> a composition which gained wide acclaim in its day—may have helped to sow La Fontaine's hopes

that he could find success by renovating Aesop's fables. More definitely, he seems to have observed and profited by Sarasin's methods in certain pieces written partly in verse and partly in prose. Sarasin had developed this technique in several letters and, most spectacularly, in his amusing and much-applauded *Pompe funèbre de Voiture*. That it was considered an innovation may be judged from Pellisson's comments on the *Pompe funèbre* in his *Discours sur les œuvres de M. Sarasin*:

... les vers n'y sont pas seulement mêlés avec la prose, mais composent avec elle le corps d'une même narration; chose pratiquée par quelques anciens, inconnue à nos Français . . . Cette liberté de changer de style . . . doit être réservée . . . aux jeux de l'esprit et à ces ouvrages d'invention qui tiennent comme un milieu entre la prose et la poésie.<sup>6</sup>

By the sixteen-sixties the practice became fairly common, particularly in letters or epistles, but it appealed to La Fontaine more than anyone else. He repeatedly experimented with narratives mixing prose and verse in various proportions, in all sorts of letters including those from Limousin, in his elaborate "relations," in *Le Songe de Vaux*, in *Psyché*. This tendency of his art, while inherited from or authorized by the literature of the salons, also had a strong personal motivation: his flair for poetic improvisation. Writing in prose seemed to smother his effervescent nature; with the slightest provocation he would shift to verse as an easier and more effective means of expression.

As always, La Fontaine's personality saved him from excessive or blind imitation. *Préciosité* gave him some of his skill as an embroiderer of lacy valentines in verse but it did not make of him another Voiture or Sarasin. Some sure instinct made him reject their affectations and led him back to the tradition of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. While they made a toy of Marot La Fontaine saw in him a source of poetry which would be colorful, natural, and authentically French in spirit. Never fully hypnotized by the enchantment of Vaux, La Fontaine had serious aspirations which he always kept in view. He could perform the intellectual acrobatics of a Voiture without forgetting his love for Virgil or Ovid. Some of the pieces of the *pension poétique*, while addressed to Fouquet or commissioned by him, deal with young Louis XIV, the royal marriage, and Mazarin's negotiations with Spain, suggesting that La Fontaine has his eye on higher spheres: perhaps a govern-



ment post or pension or, eventually, admission to the Academy. The *Relation de l'entrée de la Reine* (OD, 510-513), written for Fouquet and celebrating the new queen's arrival in Paris in 1660, exists in two distinct versions, one of which contains a flowery panegyric of Louis XIV, as though the poet hoped to make a favorable impression at the royal court. Thus, along with graceful intimacies, he was composing more elevated poems intended for wider distribution, and in these another voice is heard, that of Malherbe.

### 3. Malherbe and the Odes.

It will be recalled that Malherbe is credited—at least by the Abbé D'Olivet—with having stirred La Fontaine's first ambitions as a poet, when the latter was 22 years old and still unsure of what vocation to follow. D'Olivet pictures La Fontaine's intense excitement upon hearing an ode by Malherbe read aloud; and then: "Il se mit aussitôt à lire Malherbe, et s'y attacha de telle sorte, qu'après avoir passé les nuits à l'apprendre par cœur, il allait de jour le déclamer dans les bois. Il ne tarda pas à vouloir l'imiter; et ses essais de versification. . . furent dans le goût de Malherbe."<sup>1</sup> Scholars have often disputed D'Olivet's delightful story, despite the fact that it is based, at least in part, on a text by La Fontaine himself—the *Épître à Huet*—where the author takes his stand in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and incidentally recalls his early tastes in French poetry:

Je pris certain auteur autrefois pour mon maître;  
Il pensa me gêner. A la fin, grâce aux Cieux,  
Horace, par bonheur, me dessilla les yeux.  
L'auteur avait du bon, du meilleur; et la France  
Estimait dans ses vers le tour et la cadence.  
Qui ne les eût prisés? J'en demeurai ravi;  
Mais ses traits ont perdu quiconque l'a suivi.  
Son trop d'esprit s'épand en trop de belles choses:  
*Tous métaux y sont or, toutes fleurs y sont roses.* (OD, 646)

This final line is borrowed from Malherbe, as La Fontaine acknowledges in a footnote accompanying the *Épître*, a fact which would seem to identify the "certain auteur." On the other hand, La Fontaine's youthful compositions have not survived, his known imi-

tations of Malherbe are few in number, and his suggestion of *préciosité* in such phrases as "son trop d'esprit" would apply better to some poet like Voiture rather than to Malherbe. The meaning of this passage is still being debated and a fully satisfactory interpretation will probably have to await the discovery of further factual evidence.

La Fontaine says of the "certain auteur" that he once admired him and began for a while to follow his teachings, until luckily, Horace opened his eyes to other kinds of verse. The author had some fine qualities—in spite of certain reservations in the words "du bon, du meilleur"—but his manner was too polished, too ingenious perhaps, to be successfully copied. A similar attitude, this time definitely referring to Malherbe (and to his disciple, Racan), is to be seen toward the end of the same *Épître*, where La Fontaine expresses his admiration for the odes of these poets, a type of composition which is hard to imitate and which has gone out of fashion because it demands so much time and work:

Quant aux autres talents, l'ode, qui baisse un peu,  
Veut de la patience; et nos gens ont du feu.  
Malherbe avec Racan, parmi les chœurs des anges,  
Là-haut de l'Éternel célébrant les louanges,  
Ont emporté leur lyre; et j'espère qu'un jour  
J'entendrai leurs concerts au céleste séjour. (OD, 647)

The odes of Malherbe are discussed again, with the same nostalgic reverence, in the comedy, *Clymène*, which La Fontaine published in 1671 but which he may have begun writing many years earlier while under the protection of Fouquet. Apollo asks Calliope to sing the praises of Clymène either in the joking manner of Voiture or else in the manner of Malherbe, "Qui louait ses héros en un style superbe." The Muse complains that it would be difficult to imitate either of these "deux trop grands personnages," but Appollo goes on to say:

Je veux donc seulement que vous nous fassiez voir,  
En ce style où Malherbe a montré son savoir,  
Quelque essai des beautés qui sont propres à l'ode;  
Ou si, ce genre-là, n'étant plus à la mode  
Et demandant d'ailleurs un peu trop de loisir . . . (OD, 32-33)

Despite this concession, so characteristic of La Fontaine's feeling toward Malherbe, Calliope chooses Malherbe as a model in preference to Voiture but apologizes again for the verses she will offer,

remarking that "L'ode est chose pénible, et surtout dans le grand." La Fontaine's admiration for Malherbe was whole-hearted and he seemed to regret, quite genuinely, that styles had changed and that Malherbe's difficult art could not be revived or fully appreciated by the public. He made this complaint quite frequently, for instance in some lines sent to Racine in 1686 (*OD*, 655), saying that poets were no longer allowed to write truly serious verse and that, unlike Malherbe, they had to please ignorant readers who chafed impatiently at any sign of erudition or solemnity.

La Fontaine's reluctant acquiescence to inferior tastes, his conviction that the public wanted entertainment from him and nothing else, will have important effects in determining the nature of his fables and tales. Also it goes far to explain the curious treatment accorded Malherbe in the *Recueil de poésies chrestiennes et diverses*, the collection which La Fontaine helped to edit, in 1671, in company with some of his Jansenist friends. By this date Malherbe, while universally respected and praised to the skies by poets and critics, was considered a monument of the past and was no longer being read at all widely. The editors of the anthology felt it necessary to include an *Avertissement*—which bears no signature but which may very possibly be the work of La Fontaine—to advise the reader what to look for in the poems of Malherbe:

... il ne sera pas hors de propos d'avertir que l'on prenne garde à trois choses en lisant ses poésies: au tour et à la chute de sa strophe, à l'arrangement des paroles, d'où procède l'harmonie et la netteté de ses vers, aux expressions qui non seulement sont nobles, mais poétiques et hardies . . . . Tout cela joint à la beauté de la rime cause un plaisir sensible aux personnes même les plus grossières . . . . Ce sera assez d'ajouter en gros que M. de Malherbe en ses vers a tout ensemble de la majesté, de la force, de la douceur, une beauté mâle et des grâces. (*OD*, 779)

This tribute, with its sly challenge to "personnes grossières," reveals a literary critic of no little ability. La Fontaine, or whoever else wrote it, pays full justice to Malherbe's finer qualities: the solidity and impact of his stanzas, the resonance and concision of his lines, the nobility and vigor of his idiom. If the author was aware of any weaknesses in the poetry of the great reformer—such as pompousness or monotony—he carefully refrained from pointing them out.

Still another precaution was taken in presenting Malherbe to the public of 1671. As the *Avertissement* explains, some few lines by Mal-

herbe seemed defective or capable of improvement, and an attempt was made to correct them. This task of revision, like the *Avertissement* itself, may well have been performed by La Fontaine or at least with his cognizance. In any event one encounters, in the second volume of the collection, a series of 20 short passages, taken from 8 poems by Malherbe, which are printed in the original and a revised form (*OD*, 779-783). These corrections deal mainly with small details but, generally speaking, they seem to have been made with two goals in mind: simplification of old-fashioned sentence structure and elimination of words or allusions which were no longer clear and harmonious. In proposing amendments to the text La Fontaine (or someone who shared his attitude toward Malherbe) was guided by the desire to rehabilitate a great and neglected classic, attuning it more closely to the ears of a later and lazier generation.

It seems clear that La Fontaine placed Malherbe on a higher pedestal than any other French poet. Any doubt of this would be dispelled by a glance at the final scene of *Daphné*, where he draws up a list of nine outstanding poets of the world (*OD*, 401). Only one French name is included, that of Malherbe. While La Fontaine read and appreciated countless others, he considered Malherbe a true immortal. His idolatry was of course clouded by the knowledge that Malherbe's art had gone out of style. Although it was a dominant force in the shaping of classical French poetry La Fontaine and his contemporaries seldom dared imitate it closely—this would be doomed to failure. Thus it happens that when, on rare occasions, he seeks to pattern his writing on that of Malherbe, both he and his readers are likely to be disappointed with the result.

A case in point is the passage in *Clymène*. After much urging by Apollo the Muse Calliope has agreed to attempt a poem in the manner of Malherbe and she begins to recite a grandiose ode to love, an exhortation for Cupid to soften Clymène's heart:

Toi, qui soumets les dieux aux passions des hommes,  
 Amour, souffriras-tu qu'en ce siècle où nous sommes,  
 Clymène montre un cœur insensible à tes coups?  
 Cette belle devrait donner d'autres exemples:  
 Tu devrais l'obliger, pour l'honneur de tes temples,  
 D'aimer ainsi que nous. (*OD*, 35)

The combination of light subject and heavy manner gives these lines an air of parody or burlesque. But fortunately Calliope is

spared the task of finishing her ode. The other Muses interrupt her to express their dissatisfaction and Apollo notes that, in this type of poetry: "L'on ne réussit pas toujours comme on souhaite."

La Fontaine took greater pride in another ode where his intent to echo Malherbe is almost equally evident, the *Ode au Roi* written on behalf of Fouquet at the beginning of 1663, while the latter was in prison. As the poet declares in his second stanza, two years have passed since the disgrace of his protector:

Depuis le moment qu'il soupire,  
Deux fois l'hiver en ton empire  
A ramené les aquilons;  
Et nos climats ont vu l'année  
Deux fois de pampre couronnée  
Enrichir coteaux et vallons. (*OD*, 530)

Editors of La Fontaine have pointed out the similarity of concept and wording between these lines and certain passages in Malherbe, a similarity close enough to suggest that La Fontaine was imitating Malherbe more or less consciously.<sup>2</sup> The same inference can be drawn from La Fontaine's own commentary on the ode. He sent a copy of the poem to Fouquet in prison and the financier, whose tastes favored salon verse, made some critical remarks on it, calling it too poetic, too eloquent, to please the king. La Fontaine admitted in reply that his ode might have to be revised if presented to the king but claimed that it was intended primarily for an audience of poets:

Quant à ce que vous trouvez de trop poétique pour pouvoir plaire à notre monarque, je le puis changer en cas que l'on lui présente mon ode; ce que je n'ai jamais prétendu . . . J'ai donc composé cette ode à la considération du Parnasse . . . Or ce sont les traits de poésie qui font valoir les ouvrages de cette nature. Malherbe en est plein, même aux endroits où il parle au roi. (*OD*, 532)

One may feel sure that whenever La Fontaine attempted to write an ode, the genre where Malherbe's mastery was unrivaled, he had his predecessor in mind and found him a source of inspiration.

La Fontaine composed only a handful of genuine, serious odes. If one excludes certain paraphrases of psalms or hymns, which have an ode-like form, and humorous pieces such as his *Ode anacréontique*, there remain only four true odes: one celebrating the treaty of Nijmegen in 1678 and three earlier ones arising from his association with Fouquet. It was mainly during the early stages of his career, while

trying to earn a reputation and profit by his contacts at Vaux, that he had occasion to address odes to prominent people. And it should be noted that only one of these poems, the one for his jailed protector—and apparently because it was written for private circulation—maintains from start to finish the high seriousness, the noble phrasing, the rhetorical effects which characterize the style of Malherbe. In the others, because of courtly tastes or his own inclination toward playfulness, he makes Malherbe share the stage with D'Urfé and Voiture. In 1659 he did an *Ode pour la paix* as a tribute to Fouquet and Mazarin. It begins quite solemnly: "Le noir démon des combats/ Va quitter cette contrée"—but soon turns into a sort of "bergerie" as the poet imagines shepherds and shepherdesses enjoying the pleasures of peace:

Et que nous passions les jours  
Étendus sur l'herbe tendre,  
Prêts à conter nos amours  
À qui voudra les entendre. (*OD*, 502-503)

Two years later, for the marriage of Henriette-Anne d'Angleterre, he wrote on *Ode pour Madame* (*OD*, 519-522) in honor of the princess and her husband. Here again Malherbean eloquence is spiced with something lighter: humorously exaggerated compliments, precious mythological comparisons, smiling personal comments. La Fontaine's most impudent reminiscence of Malherbe is the opening line of a fable (*II*, 9), where he borrows a wrathful piece of invective, changes it just enough to render the outburst pompously comic, and makes it the roar of a lion annoyed by a gnat: "Va-t'en, chétif insecte, excrément de la terre!" Despite his profound admiration for Malherbe, his sense of humor and his eclectic tastes prevented him from being a faithful imitator or disciple.

Of course the total influence of Malherbe on La Fontaine, as on all French poetry of the seventeenth century and later, was very great. But this force defies exact analysis. The reformer and his school must have helped to implant La Fontaine's attention to details of versification, his taste for concise and epigrammatic wording, the fullness and density of his lines, his Virgilian sonorities. The difficulty is to determine how these qualities were acquired—whether primarily from Malherbe and certain of his followers such as Racan and Maynard, or through his readings in Latin poetry—

and how they were modulated by his own poetic genius. Only La Fontaine's more elevated works—such as *Adonis* or *Saint Malc*—can be called Malherbean in spirit and even in these his first-hand stylistic models were either Latin poets or else contemporary writers of epics and tragedies. Elsewhere, as in the tales and fables, his great originality was to disregard rules and reforms, mixing high and low diction, long and short lines, seriousness and humor, regularity and negligence, the style of Malherbe and that of the sixteenth-century poets whom Malherbe detested. Thus, while he perhaps surrendered to Malherbe's spell for a while as a young man, he soon parted company with him and looked for more congenial mentors. He never failed to pay homage to the reformer as a creator of poetry in the grand manner, but he cherished other types of poetry too and went his own way, always maintaining his own freedom.

#### 4. Ronsard and the Elegies.

Malherbe's reforms were essentially a violent reaction against the poetry of the late sixteenth century, a determined effort to discredit Ronsard and the other Pléiade poets, along with their descendants like Desportes. As Malherbe's reputation soared, that of Ronsard kept sinking. Attacked successively by Malherbe, Balzac, and other purists, Ronsard came to be treated more and more scornfully until, by the sixteen sixties, he was considered merely a grotesque and tasteless copier of Greek and Latin models. Boileau, in the *Art poétique*, denounced his "faste pédantesque" and "sa Muse en français parlant grec et latin." This is a typical, conventional comment; La Fontaine will say almost the same thing. His only mention of Ronsard occurs in the letter to Racine where he complains that modern poets are expected to conceal whatever knowledge they possess; but he points out that the opposite extreme, the abuse of erudition, is no less odious:

Et j'aimerais mille fois mieux  
Un glaive aux mains d'un furieux  
Que l'étude en certains génies.  
Ronsard est dur, sans goût, sans choix,  
Arrangeant mal ses mots, gâtant par son français  
Des Grecs et des Latins les grâces infinies. (*OD*, 655)

It should be noted that La Fontaine made these severe remarks late in life, in 1686; by this time he was a member of the Academy and a fairly orthodox literary figure. He had not always been so disdainful of Ronsard. In his earlier years he had read Ronsard with pleasure and, without saying so, had sometimes borrowed from him.

Around the middle of the seventeenth century Ronsard still had a few staunch but aging defenders, notably the poet and scholar Guillaume Colletet, and it was perhaps through Colletet that La Fontaine became interested in certain poets of the Renaissance. Colletet possessed a wealth of information about them, made studies of their genres, wrote their biographies, and collected their books for his library. Above all the rest he idolized Ronsard. A likable, convivial soul, Colletet attracted many young writers and would-be poets to his house and did not seem to mind their flirtations with his enchanting young wife, Claude, whom he married in 1652. This blond beauty was usually called by the more poetic name of Claudine, and for a very good reason; not only did she receive tributes in verse from her many admirers but she even had the reputation of being a poetess. But this seems to have been a hoax which she and her husband compounded; he composed pieces of verse which he allowed her to publish under her name. It was only after his death, in 1659, when her poetic activity mysteriously ceased, that the secret came to light.

Sometime in the sixteen fifties, through Furetière or a member of the Tallemant family, La Fontaine became acquainted with Colletet and, if his own account may be believed, embarked on a warm poetic courtship of Claudine, who was then 20 to 25 years old. He at least wrote three small poems in her honor—a sonnet and two brief madrigals—complimenting her both on her beauty and her literary prowess.<sup>1</sup> But later, upon discovering that her claims as a poetess were fraudulent—and perhaps, one suspects, after his amorous advances were rebuffed—he made her the subject of a singularly cruel and bitter epigram:

Les oracles ont cessé:  
Colletet est trépassé.  
Dès qu'il eut la bouche close,  
Sa femme ne dit plus rien;  
Elle enterra vers et prose  
Avec le pauvre chrétien . . . . (OD, 487)



He waited until 1671, several years after Claudine's death, to publish these four poems and accompanied them with a letter of explanation where he makes fun of his gullibility and impetuosity as a lover.

Savez-vous pas bien que, pour peu que j'aime, je ne vois dans les défauts des personnes non plus qu'une taupe qui aurait cent pieds de terre sur elle? . . . Dès que j'ai un grain d'amour, je ne manque pas d'y mêler tout ce qu'il y a d'encens dans mon magasin: cela fait le meilleur effet du monde; je dis des sottises en vers et en prose, et serais fâché d'en avoir dit une qui ne fût pas solennelle; enfin je loue de toutes mes forces. *Homo sum qui ex stultis insanos reddam.* (OD, 485)

There is a curious disproportion between this letter and the verses which it serves to introduce. The three pieces in praise of Claudine are full of gallant exaggerations but they show little trace of serious passion. La Fontaine seems to be thinking of something else; perhaps he had declared his love to Claudine in other poems which he either withheld from publication or published without any mention of her name. Just as he calls her Clarice in the sonnet and in one madrigal, she may appear elsewhere as Aminte or Clymène.

Claudine's husband, up to the time of his death, could well have guided La Fontaine's readings in early French poetry. Colletet may have taught him what he knew of Villon, may have helped to awaken his keen interest in Marot, and may have introduced him to Louise Labé, from who he draws the material for one of his final fables (XII, 14). And, most likely of all, Colletet's cult of Ronsard must have made some impression on him. La Fontaine's recollections of Ronsard have already come to the surface, in *Adonis*, and they appear again in a cycle of four elegies published in 1671.

The four elegies are all declarations of love addressed to a certain Clymène. The first one (OD, 599-601), unlike those which follow, has an undercurrent of humor; the poet seems to take pleasure in listing, and in exaggerating, all his failures as a lover. He tells us that Amarille always found some reason for delay, that Philis was about to surrender to him when their rendezvous was interrupted, and that several other ladies—such as Diane, Amarante, and Aminte—have treated him coldly or disdainfully. Now he has fallen in love with Clymène only to find that she is weeping inconsolably for an admirer who has recently died. These adventures presumably have some basis in fact and one or two of them seem to be confirmed by anecdotes in the "historiette" which Tallemant des

Réaux devoted to La Fontaine. The second elegy (*OD*, 601-602), equally personal but far more serious in tone, begins with a confession of the poet's impetuous, ever-changing affections:

Me voici rembarqué sur la mer amoureuse,  
 Moi pour qui tant de fois elle fut malheureuse,  
 Qui ne suis pas encor du naufrage essuyé,  
 Quitte à peine d'un vœu nouvellement payé.  
 Que faire? mon destin est tel qu'il faut que j'aime;  
 On m'a pourvu d'un cœur peu content de lui-même,  
 Inquiet, et fécond en nouvelles amours:  
 Il aime à s'engager, mais non pas pour toujours.

In these lines the sincerity of La Fontaine's emotion is unmistakable, despite the conventionality of the imagery, despite the echoes of Propertius (not only here but in various other phrases scattered through the four elegies), even despite a rather close parallel with a passage in one of the *Amores* of Ovid.<sup>2</sup> The remainder of the poem is a passionate plea—the most vehement love poetry which La Fontaine ever composed—begging Clymène to let him worship her. But his declaration seems to offend Clymène and, in the third elegy (*OD*, 602-604), he expresses his despair, his fear that some rival may succeed where he has failed, his willingness to die rather than displease his mistress, and his desire to renounce the rewards of fame and fortune: "Adieu plaisirs, honneurs, louange bien-aimée:/ Que me sert le vain bruit d'un peu de renommée?" This sentence has been ingeniously interpreted by every student of La Fontaine, in an effort to date the four elegies, but the words are vague and could apply to any date from around 1659, when the poet became a favorite of Fouquet, to 1669 or 1670, after the publication of the *Fables*.

The fourth elegy in the series (*OD*, 604-607) has a double theme: jealousy of Cléandre, Clymène's deceased admirer, and a long development on the distinction between *l'amour* and *l'amitié*, a favorite topic of precious casuistry which La Fontaine would return to again in *Le Songe de Vaux* and in his comedy entitled *Clymène*. It appears in this elegy that Clymène treated Cléandre as an *ami* and not as an *amant* but, now that he is dead, her grief betrays her true feelings toward him as *amour* rather than *amitié*. As for La Fontaine, he is incapable of being merely a friend—"Moi cesser d'être amant! et puis-je être autre chose?"—and he entreats Cly-

mène to let him take the place of Cléandre in her heart. In the course of this argument he expresses considerable admiration for Cléandre, who, like himself, was a poet. How much autobiographical truth and how much fiction enters into these elegies? It was no novelty to declare one's love to a lady in mourning; the theme may have been suggested by Maynard's famous poem, *La Belle Vieille*. And Clymène may or may not be the same lady whom La Fontaine celebrates under this name in various other compositions. It would be a tempting hypothesis—but not satisfactory on all points and probably incapable of proof—to identify Cléandre as Guillaume Colletet, who died in early 1659, and Clymène as his young wife, Claudine. This would place the composition of the elegies around 1660 and would help to explain the bitter feelings which La Fontaine elsewhere shows for Colletet's widow—the animosity of a rejected lover rather than the consternation of a poet who has been fooled by a literary hoax.

The elegies for Clymène deserve to be ranked among La Fontaine's most felicitous compositions. They have a strong similarity—in emotional intensity, in musical sonority, in details of phrasing and imagery—to the elegies and love poems of André Chénier (who was a very attentive reader of La Fontaine). They far excel the artificially bucolic elegies which other poets, for example Maucroix, Furetière, and Segrais, were writing in the 1650's and 1660's. The reason is easily discovered: La Fontaine's poems are colored and informed both by the vigorously realistic love poetry of ancient Rome and by the personal lyricism of the French Renaissance. He comes particularly close to an elegy by Ronsard, the *Discours amoureux de Genève*.<sup>3</sup> Like La Fontaine, Ronsard tells of his previous love affairs (with Marie and Cassandre) and announces that he is destined to lose his heart again. Genève, just like Clymène, mourns for a dead admirer whom the poet pleads to replace. There are many differences, also, between Ronsard's elegy and the ones by La Fontaine, but the striking resemblance in outline suggests that La Fontaine recalled the *Discours amoureux* and found in it an appropriate model for his complaints to Clymène. The question arises, again, how much La Fontaine was engaging in a literary exercise and how much he was reporting the facts of his relationship with Claudine or some other beauty, and the answer must remain uncertain. In any event his elegies recapture much of the forcefulness

and ardor of the Pléiade poets, without resorting to archaic devices or going outside the refined idiom of the precious, classical world. Along with *Adonis* and certain stanzas in *Psyché*, they give La Fontaine the right to be called a deeply sensitive love poet.

He of course wrote one other elegy, this one very famous: the lines inspired by Fouquet's imprisonment and addressed to the Nymphs of Vaux (*OD*, 528-529). La Fontaine's courage in publishing this elegy is usually overemphasized. It appeared probably in 1662, in an anonymous pamphlet (although the authorship was doubtless an open secret), and in 1671 La Fontaine began reprinting it under his signature. But the poem, while sincerely affectionate and loyal, makes no effort to defend Fouquet or proclaim his innocence—this would have been both dangerous and useless—but tactfully admits his guilt. As La Fontaine says of him, in some lines later addressed to Pellisson:

Il déplut à son roi; ses amis disparurent;  
Mille vœux contre lui dans l'abord concoururent.  
Malgré tout ce torrent, je lui donnai des pleurs;  
J'accoutumai chacun à plaindre ses malheurs! (*OD*, 82-83)

His elegy is simply a lamentation for a personal hero whose only sin was ambition—"Le plus sage s'endort sur la foi des Zéphyr"—and in its closing section a plea for mercy on the part of Louis XIV. If it reached the king's ears it could scarcely do the poet any harm and might even draw favorable attention to him in a quarter where he was still unknown. The impression that La Fontaine may have been aiming at a new and higher audience is conveyed also by the tone of the poem; it is a study in solemn, elevated eloquence. The first two lines set the keynote: "Remplissez l'air de cris en vos grottes profondes/ Pleurez, Nymphes de Vaux, faites croître vos ondes." This level of diction is maintained to the very end, culminating in a couplet which would do honor to Malherbe or Corneille: "Il est assez puni par son sort rigoureux;/ Et c'est être innocent que d'être malheureux." The noble periphrases and circumlocutions (which have been highly praised by Tristan Derème) do not, miraculously, make the elegy stilted or artificial, but give it a funereal, dirgelike quality, charged with the feeling of loss. La Fontaine could have found no better way to express his gratitude and indebtedness to his fallen protector.

5. *Le Songe de Vaux*.

If Fouquet's ambitions had been realized he and his palace of Vaux would have been celebrated not in an elegy but in a long series of compositions—*Le Songe de Vaux*—a major work which La Fontaine was obliged to leave unfinished and which has survived only in fragmentary form. In 1659, probably, Fouquet singled him out to write a descriptive poem honoring the beauties of Vaux. La Fontaine took the task very seriously and worked at it, off and on, for almost three years—until Fouquet's arrest in the fall of 1661 and possibly some months longer, while there still remained some hope that the financier would be pardoned. At the time when he abandoned his project he had composed at least ten or eleven separate pieces which he had planned to incorporate—we cannot guess how and he himself perhaps did not know—in the completed work. In 1665, after Fouquet had been tried and found guilty, he published one selection, "Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus" (Part IX according to the accepted numbering), in his first volume of *Contes et Nouvelles en vers*. Three more pieces (Parts I, II, and III) appeared in 1671, together with an "Avertissement" in which La Fontaine discussed his intentions and his treatment of the subject. During his lifetime *Le Songe de Vaux* progressed no further, except that he may have published certain fragments in other works, without explaining their origin. As Jean Demeure has pointed out, a poem in *Psyché* seems to have been transplanted there from *Le Songe de Vaux* (OD, 126–127), just like the orange trees which it celebrates and which Louis XIV's gardeners had moved from Vaux to Versailles. One of the fragments mentioned by La Fontaine in 1671, "l'aventure d'un écureuil," may have been lost, unless it is his fable—*Le Renard et l'écureuil*—which he withheld from publication because of its sympathetic allusions to Fouquet. Long after La Fontaine's death, in the edition of his *Œuvres diverses* of 1729, five more fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux* (Parts IV to VIII) came to light, establishing the text in nine sections as it is known today. Thus *Le Songe de Vaux*, in its present form, bears only a faint resemblance to the work which the poet contemplated. It is incomplete, its selections are arranged in an arbitrary order, and it includes pieces which the author had suppressed or had never corrected for publication. Even so, it constitutes one of La Fontaine's

most important early works. His most ambitious composition in the years around 1660, it marks the culmination of his art while under the spell of Fouquet's fairyland at Vaux and points to every road which his genius will travel in the years ahead.

He undoubtedly felt ill at ease in his role as an official poet. His remarks in the "Avertissement" of 1671 (*OD*, 76-78) reveal his concern, and uncertainty, in choosing appropriate styles and materials for such a work. He felt that he should combine two manners, "l'héroïque" and "le lyrique," or, as he expressed it elsewhere, "le sérieux" and "le galant" (*OD*, 95). For certain descriptions he could report what he saw, or go to architects and painters for technical information, but the newly planted gardens presented a special problem and he resorted to the device of a dream showing their appearance twenty years later when they would have attained their full growth. As a plot on which to hang several episodes he imagined the discovery of some buried jewels on the palace grounds. A mysterious inscription of the jewel case leads to a sort of beauty contest in which the four nymphs of architecture, painting, gardening, and poetry vie for first place as the greatest contributor to the delights of Vaux. This fiction becomes at times almost a "roman à clef," for the poet was under compulsion to flatter all his benefactors; Fouquet appears as Oronte, Mme Fouquet as Sylvie, and Pellisson as Ariste. A love story is also suggested, between La Fontaine himself (Acante) and a provincial beauty whom he calls Aminte. Finally, to enliven his task, he introduced several amusing scenes or tales which have little or no connection with the principal subject. The result of all this is a mixture of prose and verse, of poetry ranging from heavy descriptive pieces to graceful songs and dances, of pedantry and naturalness, of preciousness and bubbling personal lyricism.

Nothing could be more halting or labored than the first few pages of *Le Songe de Vaux*. Some of the information in the "Avertissement" is repeated in an introductory note, after which Part I (*OD*, 79-81), Acante's visit to the God of Sleep, has two distinct beginnings, a sort of dream within a dream. Once launched, however, the description of the grotto of Morpheus has a somnolent, voluptuous quality well suited to the subject. La Fontaine is on sure ground here for—without saying so and without it being noticed by editors of his poetry—he is imitating quite closely, sometimes

even translating, a passage in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (IX, 592-632). The learned character of his poetry, with its epic metaphors and classical allusions, becomes more evident in Part II (OD, 82-94) where the four nymphs make their boastful orations. Here La Fontaine even includes a series of footnotes to explain certain references to historical events and to the works of Virgil and Horace. But these harangues do not completely stifle his personality; it emerges here and there in comments which are slightly humorous or satirical, in sincere appreciation of the masterpieces of art, or in lines like these where he is stirred by the pleasures of nature:

Errer dans un jardin, s'égarer dans un bois,  
Se coucher sur des fleurs, respirer leur haleine,  
Ecouter en rêvant le bruit d'une fontaine,  
Ou celui d'un ruisseau roulant sur des cailloux,  
Tout cela, je l'avoue, a des charmes bien doux. (OD, 84)

Or again, in another selection, *Danse de l'amour* (OD, 104-106), he seems to take as his point of departure some lines by Horace (*Odes*, I, iv, 5-7), then imagines Aminte and Sylvie dancing by moonlight with their praises being sung by Cupid in delightfully airy stanzas whose lines (of five and seven syllables) bear no resemblance whatever to the Latin model. Ancient literature does not dominate *Le Songe de Vaux* but it still provides La Fontaine with one of his habitual sources of inspiration.

As the speeches in favor of architecture and painting suggest, the fine arts offered another and very powerful stimulus to his imagination. Unlike Pascal, Boileau, and so many other writers of his age, he had a real and sensitive appreciation for every kind of pictorial or plastic art. His task of describing the beauties of Vaux was an imposed subject but not a disagreeable one; he would return to the same sort of material in *Psyché*, dwelling on the statues and grottoes of Versailles and inventing rich decorations for the palace of Cupid. In *Le Voyage en Limousin* his curiosity would lead him to all the architectural monuments and works of painting or sculpture which lay along his way and, although he protested his ignorance in such matters, his comments, whether serious or joking, reveal a perceptive mind and a sure, unprejudiced sense of values. He reacted enthusiastically both to the classical symmetry of his own age and to the picturesque irregularity of early Renaissance palaces along the

Loire (OD, 544, 552). In his letter describing the castle at Richelieu he notes his impressions of works by Michel Angelo, Dürer, Titian, Poussin, Perugino, Mantegna (OD, 551-562). He was acquainted with numerous artists—Le Brun, Girardon, Mignard, and various others—and his friend Maucroix reported to him certain conversations he had held with Poussin in Rome. In Château-Thierry his artistic resources were presumably quite limited but he came to spend more and more of his time in surroundings which were very lavishly adorned, first Vaux, then the Luxembourg palace, then the residences of Mme de La Sablière and Mme Hervart. Interested in all the arts, La Fontaine has the rare gift, unique in seventeenth-century France, of communicating in poetry the sensations aroused by colors and forms. This power of visualization creates much of the palpable realness of the fables. Like a painter or sculptor who has a living model before him, he sees his characters in action and sketches their gestures in quick strokes, giving them the clear outlines of figures in a vignette or of marionettes on a miniature stage.

The only unity in *Le Songe de Vaux* is the continual evocation of an ideal world from which all ugliness is banished. It is pervaded with La Fontaine's feeling for beauty and peace and sensual pleasure. Like Le Brun's paintings which it celebrates, like Le Brun's great master, Poussin, it brings to life a golden age when voluptuous goddesses danced in Bacchic revelry across sunny Italian landscapes. In his perpetual dream of beautiful ancient realms La Fontaine came close to the principal painters of his century and shared their secret.

Several fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux* owe their origin to works of art in some other medium. In Part VIII ("Neptune à ses Tritons" OD, 112-113) the carved sea monsters in a fountain are dramatized and presented as real animals summoned there from far corners of the world. Again in Part V (OD, 102-104) La Fontaine writes a description of the ceiling decorated with paintings of the Muses by Le Brun—"si bien peintes que je crus voir ces déesses en propre personne"—and pretends that they are his own Muses who have been lured from fields and forests by the luxuries of Vaux:

Quoi? Je vous trouve ici, mes divines maîtresses!  
De vos monts écartés vous cessez d'être hôtesse!



Quel charme ont eu pour vous les lambris que je vois?  
 Vous aimiez, disait-on, le silence des bois;  
 Qui vous a fait quitter cette humeur solitaire?  
 D'où vient que les palais commencent à vous plaire?  
 J'avais beau vous chercher sur les bords d'un ruisseau.  
 Mais quelle fête cause un luxe si nouveau?  
 Pourquoi vous vêtez-vous de robes éclatantes?  
 Muses, qu'avez-vous fait de ces jupes volantes  
 Avec quoi dans les bois, sans jamais vous lasser,  
 Parmi la cour de Faune on vous voyait danser?

Another ceiling by Le Brun, his very graceful *Morphée*, which La Fontaine calls the Goddess of Night—"Qu'elle est belle à mes yeux, cette Nuit endormie!"—is described in lines as soft and sleepy as the painting itself:

Cette divinité . . .  
 Par de calmes vapeurs mollement soutenue,  
 La tête sur son bras, et son bras sur la nue,  
 Laisse tomber des fleurs, et ne les répand pas:  
 Fleurs que les seuls Zéphyrs font voler sur leurs pas. (*OD*, 104)

Part IX (*OD*, 113-116) takes its inspiration from a series of tapestries representing scenes in the career of Vulcan. But here, in "Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus," La Fontaine adopts quite a different manner. His mixed meters, his jibes at the foibles of women, his ridicule of gods and goddesses, his lingering over suggestive details, his familiar idiom, all resemble the technique which he will exploit in his tales and, to some degree, in his fables. "Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus" may or may not be the first tale in verse which he composed but it reveals, four or five years before the publication of *Joconde*, a full mastery of the style which was to make him famous. The only difference between it and the later tales lies in its remoteness from real life: legendary figures from a tapestry instead of merchants, monks, and deceitful wives or husbands.

*Le Songe de Vaux* is a prophetic work, rich in omens for La Fontaine's future interests and activities. Two of the fragments (Parts III and IV, *OD*, 95-102) are animal stories in verse which foreshadow his fables. But he seems not yet to have discovered his affinity for Aesop, since these animals from the garden pools at Vaux—a salmon, a sturgeon, and a dying swan—need an interpreter to make their language understood and merely serve as a con-

venient device for offering flowery compliments to Fouquet. Like Mars and Venus they are drawn from the world of art and mythology rather than from life. Another fragment (Part VII, *OD*, 106-111), Acante's graceful love story in prose, interspersed with stanzas of lyric verse, introduces themes which La Fontaine will always cherish. Aminte's preference for "amitié" over "amour" has already been seen in an elegy offered to Clymène. When Acante gazes enraptured on his sleeping mistress and is tempted to steal a kiss he is repeating a pattern which La Fontaine may have seen in *L'Astrée* and which he confessed to be a favorite scene in *Orlando furioso* (*OD*, 586). The situation recurs in at least one of the *Contes* (II, 14) and in the comedy, *Clymène*, and of course it lies at the center of the Psyche and Cupid legend, both in Apuleius and in the novel by La Fontaine. It is not surprising that the poet persisted in leaving certain fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux* unpublished; he had already made use of them in the composition of other works published in the 1660's. Nothing was entirely wasted, not even the little fable *Le Renard et l'écureuil*, from which he took four lines for another fable free from dangerous allusions: *Le Lièvre et la perdrix* (V, 17).

This tendency to repeat himself, or rather, to economize on effort and prevent good lines from being lost, is one of his most permanent characteristics as a writer. Scraps of *Le Voyage en Limousin*, which was not intended for publication, will find their way into the fables. The manuscript of *Achille* includes a forceful couplet recalled from *Adonis* (*OD*, 5, 457). A stanza from *Le Songe de Vaux* reappears as part of a song in *Galatée* (*OD*, 106-107, 405). Three lines which describe a fountain at Vaux are utilized again in *Psyché* (*OD*, 113, 131), applied to one of the fountains at Versailles. Indeed, the setting of *Psyché* is so similar in conception and style to *Le Songe de Vaux* that the novel can almost be called "Le Songe de Versailles." Acante will wander again amid unfinished gardens and buildings, imagining them in their completed state. Whether or not the four friends of *Psyché* are a projection of the same personalities who appear in *Le Songe de Vaux*, as Jean Demeure has argued, they indulge in the same sort of conversation with one another and engage in a literary debate which is not far removed in spirit from one in the earlier work: the contest of the four nymphs. Quite possibly La Fontaine began his version of the Psyche legend while under the

protection of Fouquet, for he admitted that its composition was interrupted, without indicating for how long. But surely the "encadrement" of the novel, if not the central plot, is the realization of an idea which was intended for *Le Songe de Vaux* and which the author could not bear to discard. The anachronistic air of certain pages in *Psyché*, or of various smaller pieces published around 1670, reflects a period of preciousness and gallantry, a dreamlike world full of love and beauty, an age of youthful ardor, to which La Fontaine would always cling, tenaciously and nostalgically.

## CHAPTER IV

# The Human Comedy

### 1. From Vaux to Limousin.

Even during the most dazzling period of Fouquet's ascendancy La Fontaine never surrendered completely to the enchantment of Vaux. If he erred on the side of preciousness and artificiality, courting nymphs and goddesses and composing works of ingenious fantasy, he did not take his dreams too seriously and nearly always maintained his gift of humorous detachment. A few of the pieces of the "Pension poétique," in particular the *épîtres* and *relations*, reveal that he could not only pay gallant compliments but could also make a merry commentary on scenes of daily life. In his *Relation de l'entrée de la Reine* he made no attempt to describe the procession accurately and completely. He let his attention wander, picked on amusing details, and was interested most of all in Cardinal Mazarin's mules, to which he kept coming back with an impudent little refrain: "Mais tout cela n'est rien au prix/Des mulets de Son Éminence" (*OD*, 511). His best known *relation*, in the form of a letter sent to Maucroix in Rome, was devoted to the brilliant reception at Vaux on August 17, 1661, attended by the King and numerous members of the royal court. This was the moment when the splendor of Vaux attained its zenith. For the King's entertainment, amid the gardens and fountains, Fouquet offered a banquet, an elaborate ballet, a new comedy by Molière, and a display of fireworks. La Fontaine was of course impressed by all this magnificence and described it very much as Voiture or Sarasin would have done, offering exaggerated compliments to everyone who collaborated in preparing the spectacle. But his comments on *Les Fâcheux* point significantly to a fresh literary trend which he was quick to sense and to follow:

C'est un ouvrage de Molière:  
Cet écrivain par sa manière  
Charme à présent toute la Cour.  
De la façon que son nom court,  
Il doit être par delà Rome:  
J'en suis ravi, car c'est mon homme.

Te souvient-il bien qu'autrefois  
Nous avons conclu d'une voix  
Qu'il allait ramener en France  
Le bon goût et l'air de Térence? . . .  
Et maintenant il ne faut pas  
Quitter la nature d'un pas. (OD, 525-526)

Like Molière, perhaps even because of him, for La Fontaine had watched his rise to fame with delight and doubtless with no little envy, the poet of Vaux was ready to distinguish himself as an observer of the eternal human comedy. Without forgetting what he had learned, without abandoning his beloved books, La Fontaine was going to put more of real life and more of himself in everything he wrote, reporting what he saw and experienced in the world about him.

The disgrace of his protector of course helped to bring him down to earth. A few weeks after the royal festival at Vaux Fouquet was arrested for embezzlement and eventually was tried, found guilty, and condemned to life imprisonment. This was a severe blow to La Fontaine who lost at the same time a powerful patron and a friend for whom he felt a close attachment. To add to his depression—whether by pure coincidence or because of his sympathies for Fouquet—he found himself, around the end of 1661, accused of “usurpation de noblesse” and subject to a heavy fine which he could ill afford to pay. Perhaps his “seigneur” at Château-Thierry, the Duke of Bouillon, rescued him from this predicament. It is not at all certain whether La Fontaine, like his uncle Jannart and Pellisson, underwent any punishment for his association with Fouquet. When Jannart was sent into exile at Limoges, in 1663, presumably so that Fouquet would be deprived of his legal assistance, La Fontaine accompanied his uncle—perhaps voluntarily and perhaps under compulsion—together with a police officer charged with carrying out the king’s orders. The excitement of traveling enabled him to forget the sad occasion for the trip. La Fontaine treated this journey, the only long one he ever made, as a sightseeing tour and recorded his adventures in a series of gay letters. Although, by this time, he had undoubtedly begun writing his first tales and fables, the six surviving letters of his *Voyage en Limousin*—which have the advantage of being exactly dated—offer the clearest foretaste of his art as a storyteller.

These letters, which he sent to "Mademoiselle" de La Fontaine, are his only work addressed to his wife or in any way inspired by her. Without examining all the theories and legends which have grown up in connection with their marriage, and its eventual collapse, one must try to appreciate the fact that their relations, in 1663, were perhaps unconventional but still quite cordial. La Fontaine's infidelities and indifference to his conjugal duties had begun quite early, certainly by the sixteen fifties, to judge by the anecdotes which Tallemant des Réaux has reported, and there is reason to think that his wife, out of spite or jealousy, also became involved in some sort of love affairs or flirtations. Around the time of his father's death, in 1658, he and his wife obtained a legal separation "quant aux biens," a financial measure which caused no scandal and did not affect their marital status. In the sixteen sixties they still lived together most of the time and, if La Fontaine sometimes made trips alone to Paris or Vaux or Rheims, he kept returning to his home in Château-Thierry, and indeed would keep coming back, although less frequently, all the rest of his life. One wonders if La Fontaine, like Racine, respected the judgment of Mlle de La Fontaine in literary matters. In his second letter from Uzès, on July 4, 1662, Racine asked to have her opinion on one of his poems, along with the criticism of the "Académie de Château-Thierry," apparently a literary club or circle to which she belonged.<sup>1</sup> It was not until later, around 1671 or 1672—after almost 25 years of married life—that La Fontaine and his wife drifted apart and began to lead separate lives. Henceforth he would spend nearly all his time in Paris, at the home of Mme de La Sablière, and his wife, "ennuyée de vivre avec son mari,"<sup>2</sup> as Louis Racine expressed it, would retire permanently to Château-Thierry. Around 1693, at the time of his conversion, the poet and his wife were finally reunited. His works are full of comments on marriage, usually joking or satirical but sometimes personal in tone and tinged with bitterness or regret—such as the "Ah si . . ." in *Philémon et Baucis*, or the definition of a perfect match as one in which "Les conjoints se souffrent leurs sottises" (*Contes*, V, 7). Most poignant of all, and most significant for the situation prevailing around the time of the *Voyage en Limousin*, or a few years later, is a reflection in *Psyché* which seems to arise from La Fontaine's own marital experience: ". . . qu'on se querelle, qu'on se sépare, qu'on proteste de se haïr, il reste toujours

un levain d'amour entre deux personnes qui ont été unies si étroitement" (*OD*, 169). In the letters from Limousin La Fontaine's personal freedom is very evident, for he dwells impishly and suggestively, as in his *Contes*, on the amorous possibilities of all the young women whom he encounters. Yet at the same time he addresses his wife with a certain tenderness and affection, born of their intimate association over a period of more than 15 years.

One suspects that La Fontaine was not in the habit of writing long letters to his wife to keep her informed of his activities, for he begins his *Voyage en Limousin* with a somewhat labored explanation of the pleasure and profit which he hopes his letters will afford her. This opening paragraph of the first letter (*OD*, 533), dated August 23, 1663, is a puzzling document which has given rise to various conflicting interpretations of Mlle de La Fontaine's character in the eyes of her husband. She has been labeled "bas bleu," "précieuse," "paresseuse," "mauvaise ménagère," "insensible," and these epithets have usually been combined with certain unreliable anecdotes—particularly D'Olivet's report that she was like Honesta in *Belphégor* (*Contes*, V, 7), a quarrelsome fault-finder, which may indeed be true if applied to her old age, when D'Olivet began collecting his information—resulting in a portrait as incongruous as it is unfounded. And on the other hand various defenders have come to the rescue of Mlle de La Fontaine, treating her character, and her relationship with her husband, as a poem bathed in sweetness and light. The truth is that nothing whatever is known about her, except that she was a cultivated woman and, like every well-bred woman of her century, an avid reader of novels. That is La Fontaine's point of departure: he reminds her that she has read countless novels, remarks that the new ones are sometimes disappointing, and suggests that she avoid boredom and vary her literary diet by reading travel journals such as the one he is about to provide. All this is expressed quite noncommittally and would not be taken as reproachful except for one enigmatic sentence: "Vous ne jouez [gamble? play a musical instrument?], ni ne travaillez, ni ne vous souciez du ménage; et, hors le temps que vos bonnes amies vous donnent par charité, il n'y a que les romans qui vous divertissent." La Fontaine seems, very oddly, to be chiding his wife for her indifference to housework and for her poor taste in literature (but he himself was a constant reader of novels). The meaning is clear, however, if one assumes that she

was in poor health, quite a reasonable assumption in view of her prolonged sickness mentioned a few years earlier by La Fontaine in his correspondence with Jannart (*OD*, 481, 482). If she was confined by illness this would account for the charitable visits of her friends, for her inability to keep her mind occupied, and for her husband's efforts to relieve the monotony of her reading. Without some such supposition it is hard to explain why La Fontaine bothered to write the letters at all. He devoted considerable time and work to them, unselfishly, with apparently no hope that they would add to his fame or fortune. Their only purpose, as he told his wife, was to provide "un amusement qui vous doit faire passer votre exil avec moins d'ennui" (*OD*, 551).

Although they were not intended for publication and were not printed until long after their author's death, the letters have a distinct literary flavor. La Fontaine is seeking not only to amuse his wife but also, one guesses, to please a few close friends and relatives—perhaps the "Académie de Château-Thierry" or even some of Jannart's associates in the service of Fouquet—to whom the letters might be shown. The *Voyage en Limousin* is often classed in the same genre as the *Voyage* of Chapelle and Bachaumont, to which it bears some resemblance, in its descriptions of landscapes and rivers, its commentary on provincial customs, and its determined wittiness of tone. La Fontaine may perhaps have had these predecessors in mind but his travel journal comes much closer in conception to the accepted traditions of epistolary art. His letters suggest some of those by Voiture—with Voiture's exaggerated compliments omitted—and they have exact prototypes in the epistles in prose and verse which La Fontaine and other authors were exchanging in the 1650's and 1660's. From the "Relation d'une fête donnée à Vaux," composed for Maucroix, it is only a step to the *Voyage en Limousin*. An even closer model, because of the similar subject-matter, can be found in Racine's first letter from Uzès, in 1661, where he recounts to La Fontaine—gracefully, urbanely, rather eruditely—his impressions of the Rhone, of the language of Provence, and of the beautiful women he has seen.<sup>3</sup> The *Voyage en Limousin* is a literary work but of this special kind: intimate, meant for private circulation, yet polished and amusingly sophisticated. These letters need to be recognized for what they are; even without the many delightful ones which La Fontaine will write in later years, they entitle him to be known as



one of the great letter writers of his century. He is only surpassed by Mme de Sévigné with whom, indeed, he has in common many qualities of temperament, intellectual shrewdness, and personal charm.

Always sensitive to the tastes of his audience, La Fontaine carefully set the tone of his *Voyage* at the level which his wife and her friends could best appreciate. The surviving manuscripts contain many corrections in the author's hand. As he wrote he made many little improvements in expression and sentence structure and crossed out phrases which might seem too serious or too technical. Upon seeing busts of Tiberius and Livia he refers, in his first draft, to the portrayal of these characters by Tacitus and by Corneille in *Cinna*; then he suppresses these slightly pedantic or difficult allusions and identifies the statues by citing a favorite novelist: "Ce sont personnes que vous connaissez, et dont M. de La Calprenède nous entretient quelquefois" (OD, 560). Throughout his letters, as in *Le Songe de Vaux*, he faced the stylistic problem of describing buildings and works of art in simple, non-professional language. He knew how to use such expressions as "colonnes rostrales" but took great pains to avoid them, sometimes offering two or three simpler equivalents to make his meaning clear (OD, 553). Repeatedly he refrained from describing certain scenes, or sketched them with only a few outstanding details—to the regret of modern readers, for whom the letters are a fascinating but disconcertingly incomplete historical document—but he could not bear to be pretentious or boring. Before attempting to report his visit to the palace at Richelieu he assured his wife that she need not expect a scholarly treatise from him, but merely an account of "quelques singularités" which caught his attention: "Ce ne sont peut-être pas les plus remarquables; mais que vous importe? De l'humeur dont je vous connais, une galanterie sur ces matières vous plaira plus que tant d'observations savantes et curieuses" (OD, 552). Thus La Fontaine left many things unsaid and limited himself to certain incidents which amused him or which he could relate in a playful, fanciful manner. But if the letters are a "galanterie," they have far less ethereal preciousness than the "pension poétique" and the other works composed for Fouquet. No longer an aspiring courtier, no longer obliged to use his pen for paid assignments or pieces of flattery, La Fontaine is writing spontaneously and naturally about the events of his own everyday life. For

the first time in his career we find him fully relaxed, in a holiday mood, free to indulge his every inclination.

A diary in letter form, the *Voyage en Limousin* reflects the personality of La Fontaine on every page. He possessed endless curiosity and took an interest in everything—the sights and landmarks along the way, the food, the people (especially the women, of course), the provincial customs, and all the little incidents which marked his journey. His love of nature led him to comment enthusiastically on gardens, on the river Loire, and on spacious landscapes (provided that the hills were not too steep and the roads too rocky). He repeatedly went out of his way to look at statues, palaces, or churches, upon which he passed judgment—almost always humorously and sometimes quite irreverently—guided by instinctive good taste and a versatile knowledge of the arts. Not that he claimed to be an authority in such matters; he always presented his opinions modestly, as personal impressions and subject to error. His candor and simplicity give the letters much of their charm; instead of trying to make himself seem important or virtuous he makes fun of himself and calls attention to his eccentricities: his absent-mindedness, his lapses of memory, his laziness, his indiscretions with women. Despite his self-depreciation one senses that he was a delightful traveling companion and, on occasion, a fluent and witty conversationalist. The possibility of being attacked by bandits in a desolate valley aroused him to discourse at length on the advantages of war: “Si elle produit des voleurs, elle les occupe; ce qui est un grand bien pour tout le monde, et particulièrement pour moi, qui crains naturellement de les rencontrer” (OD, 537). A destroyed town would make him reflect eloquently on the vicissitudes of fortune and, just as effectively, an uninteresting countryside would silence him and put him to sleep: “En vérité, la fortune se moque bien du travail des hommes. J’en entretenais le soir notre compagnie, et le lendemain nous traversâmes la Beauce, pays ennuyeux, et qui, outre l’inclination que j’ai à dormir, nous en fournissait un très beau sujet” (OD, 538). These intimate confidences, sincere but jokingly expressed, provide the only detailed self-portrait which La Fontaine has left, a portrait which suffices to explain why all his contemporaries laughed at him but loved him.

Perhaps his outstanding trait visible in these letters is his emotional sensitivity. Every beautiful sight stirs his heart, every ugly

one fills him with revulsion. He recoils in horror upon seeing some withered old gypsies and he complains so forcefully of his disagreeable impressions of Bellac that natives of the town, even Jean Giraudoux, have found it hard to forgive him. In Amboise he made a pilgrimage to the castle where Fouquet had formerly been confined, and, deeply affected, gazed at the locked doors and stopped-up windows. Places which recalled the memory of Richelieu and Gaston d'Orléans also moved him, in all sincerity, to voice his loyalty and admiration for the heroes of his youth. At the time of his trip La Fontaine was 42 years old and, although still a beginner in literature, was becoming a middle-aged man acutely aware of the advancing years. He was touched to find an elderly relative at Châtellerault, not only because the man was still hearty and healthy but because he and his wife were so happily married. "Il y a ainsi d'heureuses vieillesses, à qui les plaisirs, l'amour et les grâces, tiennent compagnie jusqu'au bout: il n'y en a guère, mais il y en a, et celle-ci en est une" (*OD*, 564). This melancholy tenderness will become, in the fables, one of the most characteristic and most appealing veins of La Fontaine's lyricism. He will treat his animals as though they were human beings, his own friends, and sympathize with them, gently and a little sadly.

His emotions never sweep him off his feet; they are always tempered by a sane, common-sense view of life. If he is sentimental in one breath, he is likely to be hard-headed and practical in the next. He plays with the idea of propitiating various gods and goddesses, then sighs that he cannot sacrifice a steer because of the high price of beef: "Les bœufs du Limousin sont trop chers, et il y en a qui se vendent cent écus dans le pays" (*OD*, 550). His admiration for Richelieu's palace and all its art treasures does not prevent him from criticizing the Cardinal for having built the edifice, and attempting to establish a city, on unfertile land far from any river or main roads. The sight of the deserted town causes him to reflect that great men are nearly always victims of vanity. This tendency to criticize any folly or excess, including his own, reveals the down-to-earth moralist in La Fontaine, a moralist who will find his ideal vehicle in fables modeled after those of Aesop.

As an observer of people and places he has a journalist's flair for noting details with dramatic value or human interest. His description of the passengers who travel with him and Jannart in the

carriage is conveyed in the briefest of vignettes: "Dieu voulut enfin que le carrosse passât: le valet de pied y était; point de moines, mais en récompense trois femmes, un marchand qui ne disait mot, et un notaire qui chantait toujours, et qui chantait très mal" (OD, 536). La Fontaine pays little attention to most of these persons, scarcely mentioning them in his subsequent letters, but he picks out two of them for inclusion in his cast of characters and portrays these two very vividly. One is their official escort, the "valet de pied" (M. de Châteauneuf), of whom La Fontaine will say, with his customary professional frankness: "Il me semble qu'il ne fait pas mal son personnage dans cette relation" (OD, 568). The other is a countess who interests the author because, even though deficient in beauty, she is veiled in mystery: ". . . il y avait une Poitevine qui se qualifiait comtesse; elle paraissait assez jeune et de taille raisonnable, témoignait avoir de l'esprit, déguisait son nom, et venait de plaider en séparation contre son mari: toutes qualités de bon augure, et j'y eusse trouvé matière de cajolerie, si la beauté s'y fût rencontrée; mais sans elle rien ne me touche" (OD, 536). La Fontaine constructs several of his letters around this group of actors and, along with his usual commentary on scenery and historical monuments, reports the activities of Châteauneuf and the countess: their rivalry to obtain the best hotel room (hers turning out to be full of fleas), and their heated discussion of religious matters. She was a Protestant and made the mistake of showing Châteauneuf a book by a Protestant theologian:

M. de Châteauneuf . . . lui dit que sa religion ne valait rien, pour bien des raisons. Premièrement, Luther a eu je ne sais combien de bâtards; les huguenots ne vont jamais à la messe; enfin il lui conseillait de se convertir, si elle ne voulait aller en enfer: car le purgatoire n'était pas fait pour des gens comme elle. La Poitevine se mit aussitôt sur l'Écriture, et demanda un passage où il fût parlé du purgatoire; pendant cela le notaire chantait toujours; M. Jannart et moi nous endormîmes. (OD, 538)

Throughout the letters one finds scenes like this, colorful anecdotes, dramatic incidents—some of them based on real happenings, others gaily invented to suit the occasion—which all attest La Fontaine's delight in telling stories. Just as in his *Contes*, which are not far away, he takes dry facts and instinctively weaves them into a lively, intimate narrative, animated with impudent humor and the warm glow of his own personality.

Fiction and poetry go hand in hand as outlets for his imagination. Writing verse was more than a pastime or craft for him, it was a physical need. Whenever he wished to convey a pressing thought, or describe a striking scene, or report some special shade of emotion, or merely to make a merry joke, he switched from prose to verse, swiftly and naturally. Improvisation came easily and (as long as he was not writing for publication and did not need to revise and polish his work) he could turn out lines which leave much to be desired as poetry but which are nevertheless graceful and amusingly fanciful. Even these hastily composed bits of verse are full of literary memories. Sometimes it is a line by Virgil or Ovid which La Fontaine renders into French and treasures in his mind, saving it for further use in his fables (*OD*, 547, 561). The bumpy road leading to Bellac makes him think of a stanza form which had been cultivated by the Pléiade and which he will echo again in the fables in certain passages combining metrical units of seven and three syllables:

Des plus sages à la fin  
Ce chemin  
Épuise la patience.  
Qui n'y fait que murmurer  
Sans jurer,  
Gagne cent ans d'indulgence. (*OD*, 566)

Having heard a local legend about the hunchbacks in Orléans and Blois, La Fontaine put the story in verse, picturing the people of Beauce as they complain to the gods about their steep hills and an irate Destiny which punishes them for being discontented:

"Quoi! toujours mont et jamais plaine!  
Faites-nous avoir triple haleine,  
Jambes de fer, naturel fort,  
Ou nous donnez une campagne  
Qui n'ait plus ni mont ni montagne.  
—Oh! oh! leur repartit le Sort,  
Vous faites les mutins, et dans toutes les Gaules  
Je ne vois que vous seuls qui des monts vous plaigniez.  
Puisqu'ils vous nuisent à vos pieds,  
Vous les aurez sur vos épaules."  
Lors la Beauce de s'aplanir  
De s'égaliser, de devenir  
Un terroir uni comme glace;  
Et bossus de naître en la place,  
Et monts de déloger des champs . . . (*OD*, 543)

This fable—for no other name can be applied to it—possesses all the qualities of familiar dialogue, of swift narration, of playful invention, of moral teaching, which will distinguish La Fontaine's first volume of fables, published five years later. Similarly, on many occasions in the letters, he bursts into song, sometimes in regular stanzas but more often in free verse, at the sight of anything which strikes his fancy. His inspiration has the greatest diversity and ranges from gardens, rivers, and works of art, to decrepit horses and the ravaging effects of smallpox. As one reads the *Voyage en Limousin* one learns how clearly and how sensitively La Fontaine saw the world about him. The realism, the satire, even the delicious humor of his tales and fables, are the product of prolonged observation of life, filtered and crystallized in the mind of a gifted poet.

## 2. *The Realistic Tradition—Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard.*

La Fontaine's vision of the world, while clear-sighted and practical, is always expressed in literary form and is colored by a multitude of literary memories. Instead of reporting his experience factually he dramatizes it and conveys its emotional quality, transforming it into a song, a comedy, or a story and, very often, using it to enrich a plot or theme which he finds ready-made in some favorite book. The events of daily life keep reminding him of situations in plays or novels, and, conversely, characters in literature—most notably the pale outlines of animals in Aesop's fables—summon up what he has observed in human nature. In his imagination, particularly during the period when he was conceiving his first fables and tales, there was a continual interplay of reality and art, of knowledge drawn from life and knowledge drawn from books.

In the early sixteen sixties La Fontaine's literary interests seem to have veered from the imaginative to the realistic. Although he doubtless continued to read all his old favorites, ranging from Virgil to Voiture, he began to explore and to imitate other models which belonged to the plain-spoken, satirical tradition. This tradition, handed down across the ages, had flourished in France since the medieval farces and *fabliaux*, continuing unbroken in the hands of many prose writers of the Renaissance (and of some poets, particularly Marot), and in La Fontaine's own century still inspired sati-

rists, libertines, authors of comedies, and an occasional novelist. In his *Contes* La Fontaine would develop hackneyed plots and time-honored themes—the ruses of women, the gullibility of husbands, the adventures of priests—which are identical with those of many a *fabliau*, despite the fact that he knew very little about the literature of the Middle Ages. Just as his fables rejoin and duplicate certain incidents in the *Roman de renart*, because both descend from Greek and Latin sources, his tales in verse acquire a medieval flavor, again indirectly, through his raiding of Boccaccio and other story tellers who kept alive the *fabliau* material of thirteenth-century France. His Gallic blood led him unfailingly to those authors whose temperament corresponded to certain deeply rooted characteristics of his own race: gayety, common sense, a fondness for well-told anecdotes, and an unabashed interest in relations between the sexes. His tales have little of the coarseness and brutality of the medieval *fabliaux* but nevertheless resemble them in robustness of spirit and in healthy, middle-class good-humor.

La Fontaine's oldest French model is the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, dating from the middle of the fifteenth century. This collection of tales, written possibly by Antoine de la Sale, takes its form and technique from Boccaccio, while employing story material which seems to belong to the oral folklore tradition. La Fontaine often borrows plots or incidents for his *Contes* from the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*<sup>1</sup> and avows that along with the *Decameron*, this is one of his most cherished sources:

Mais, comme il faut manger de plus d'un pain,  
Je puise encore en un vieux magasin;  
Vieux, des plus vieux, où Nouvelles nouvelles  
Sont jusqu'à cent, bien déduites et belles  
Pour la plupart, et de très bonne main. (*Contes*, II, 6)

The *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* did much to generate the vogue for story collections in prose throughout the sixteenth century—those by Marguerite de Navarre, by Bonaventure des Périers, by Noel du Fail—all of which were well known to La Fontaine and provided him with some of his subjects in the *Contes*. He also drew, occasionally, upon various works of fiction of the early seventeenth century, such as D'Aubigné's *Faeneste*, D'Ouville's collection of short anecdotes, *Les Contes aux heures perdues*, and *La Précaution inutile* by Scarron. La Fontaine seems to gain from these authors a knack

for selecting precise, vivid details to enrich his narrative, but in every case he neglects what is most interesting or characteristic in their manners of writing, whether it be moral earnestness, social satire, or amusing repartee. All he sought was a series of plots, frameworks to build upon with his own fancy and his own brand of humor.

His style, of course, was less affected by these works in prose than by the conventions of realistic and satirical poetry. There were few real satires written during the French Renaissance although perhaps the name could be applied to certain passages in Marot, to Du Bellay's *Poète courtisan*, and to parts of Ronsard's *Discours*. The genre as it is known today, descending from Horace and Juvenal and brought to perfection by Boileau, was introduced by Mathurin Régnier in the first years of the seventeenth century. There is little doubt that La Fontaine was thoroughly familiar with the satires of Régnier, which still enjoyed great favor and were very frequently reprinted in the period from 1640 to 1660. He seems to recall lines by Régnier in at least two of his early fables<sup>2</sup> and often employs literary devices which the satirist could have taught him: portraits tinged with sarcasm, comments on his own character and tastes, fast-moving dialogue, popular and provincial expressions, proverbs and moral commonplaces. But these same features of style are to be found in many other poets who were contemporaries of Régnier or who followed in his wake, and whose works La Fontaine doubtless also knew. He surely read the satires of his friend Furetière and those by Du Lorens (who seems to inspire certain details of *Le Meunier, son fils et l'âne*), and must have enjoyed the rowdy licentiousness of the libertine poets. In particular, he comes close to Théophile de Viau both in his sensitive feeling for nature and in his vocabulary of images for evoking outdoor scenes. As one reads the many realistic writers who preceded La Fontaine it becomes apparent that he innovated very little; his genius was to borrow on all sides, bringing together and exploiting with perfect taste many pre-existing but divergent literary trends.

There are, naturally, several outstanding figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to whom he is especially indebted, the first and foremost being Rabelais. Unlike most critics, who judged Rabelais very severely, on moral grounds, La Fontaine read "maître François" with uninhibited delight and openly claimed him as a



mentor (*OD*, 672). But the two authors are seldom similar to one another, despite the fact that both are humorists, or that both take a realistic view of life, or that both are masters of mixing fact with fantasy. The attraction of opposites must have drawn them together, for there is little in common between La Fontaine's restrained lyricism and the enormities of Rabelais's epic imagination, between the one's gentle wit and the other's resounding laughter, between the carefully selective wording of the fables and the intoxicated erudition throughout the adventures of Pantagruel. It is quite possible that La Fontaine sometimes imitated the style of "maître François" for the fun of it, like Maucroix, who exchanged some Rabelaisian letters with M. de La Haye, the "prévôt" of Château-Thierry. But in his published works La Fontaine avoided the flood-like gushing of Rabelaisian verbiage, merely using it as a source of picturesque details and old-fashioned expressions to brighten certain lines of his tales and fables. One finds, particularly in the fables, many words and phrases recalled from *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, along with many colorful proper names, such as Rodilardus, Thibault l'agnelet, Robin Mouton, or Martin-bâton. Rabelais also offered a bountiful supply of licentious stories suitable for exploitation in the *Contes*, but La Fontaine made few attempts to take advantage of this material. Perhaps he felt that he was betraying the original, or despaired of adapting sixteenth-century humor to the tastes of his own age, for his tales imitated at length from Rabelais (*L'Anneau d'Hans Carvel*, *Le Diable de Papefiguière*) are diluted and shortened, losing much of their former verve.

He seems to have taken less interest in the giants of Rabelais than in certain figures of human proportions, mainly Panurge. Although he could not have been ignorant of the exploits of Gargantua and Pantagruel he seldom bothered to mention them. What he relished most, apparently, was the voyage to many a strange land in *Le Quart Livre*, above all the episode on shipboard where Panurge contrives to drown Dindenault, the sheep merchant, along with all his herd. La Fontaine alludes to this delightful scene again and again (*OD*, 32; *Fables*, V, 20), and once, as a prologue to one of his *Contes* (*L'Abbesse*, IV, 2), he tells the story himself, gratuitously, devoting some thirty lines to the evocation of a favorite passage in literature. In the vast gallery of portraits drawn by Rabelais it is undoubtedly Panurge—with his effervescent boasting, his streak of cowardice, his

inexhaustible fund of ruses—who most often resembles the characters in La Fontaine's tales and fables.

One would expect Montaigne, more than Rabelais, to have struck a common chord in the mind of La Fontaine and to have influenced his ways of thought. But, curiously, he only once mentions Montaigne, parenthetically, when apologizing for his haste and lack of order as a letter-writer (*OD*, 705): "Sans m'arrêter à aucun arrangement, non plus que faisait Montagne, je passe de l'hôtel de Conti aux affaires de delà les monts. . . ." This comment, made in 1689, reveals at most that by his last years he had read enough of Montaigne to have an impression of the essayist's abrupt transitions and wide-ranging interests. It is, of course, highly probable that La Fontaine did not wait for his old age to become acquainted with Montaigne and that the essays contributed to his moral outlook in the fables, but it is exceedingly difficult to find any direct borrowings, deliberate imitation, or even any clearly defined reminiscences. He seems to make use of Montaigne in *La Mort et le mourant* (VIII, 1), taking the subject from Abstemius but recalling a pattern of thought and a story framework elaborated in the essay *Que philosophe c'est apprendre à mourir*. But, in addition to these two main "sources," La Fontaine must have had other readings simmering in his mind. The theme was a conventional one among Montaigne's disciples and descendants, and a treatment of it by Gomberville could very well have provided the poet with certain features of his fable.<sup>3</sup> The study of La Fontaine's sources, always subtle and complex, becomes particularly dangerous if one seeks to assess his indebtedness to certain thinkers like Montaigne. Without ever reading a page by Montaigne, La Fontaine could have absorbed many of the essayist's ideas (or the ideas of Plutarch and other ancient thinkers, which Montaigne had made his own), for their widespread diffusion had thoroughly impregnated the moral climate of seventeenth-century France.

If he often dwells, for example, on the weakness and inconstancy of man, did this concept come to him from his Jansenist friends or was it Montaigne and Charron who influenced him and helped to prepare his sympathies for Port-Royal? Similarly, when he discusses the contradictory opinions of various philosophers, as in *Un animal dans la lune* (*Fables*, VII, 18), is he inspired mainly by his reading of ancient thinkers, by his own relativism, by the philosophic and

religious quarrels of his age, or perhaps by Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*? His views on the mentality of animals owe much to Gassendi and other theorizers of his own century but, indirectly, they derive from the writings of Montaigne. However acquired, La Fontaine's personal convictions and favorite themes are nevertheless strikingly analogous to those of Montaigne. Both authors have a strong feeling for the diversity of men and customs, both are believers in moderation and tolerance, both have an epicurean concern for their own pleasure and comfort, both combat whatever is irrational, both teach a restrained idealism tempered by common sense.

The similarity between them seems to arise less from La Fontaine's awareness of his predecessor than from a parallelism of their culture and temperament. Latin was Montaigne's native language and, like La Fontaine, his knowledge of Greek was very limited and mostly secondhand. The authors whom Montaigne cherished and never ceased to quote—Seneca, Amyot's Plutarch, Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, among others—were essentially the same ones who nourished and delighted La Fontaine. This common intellectual background is accompanied by a common approach to literary problems. Both Montaigne and La Fontaine are "imitators" who work book in hand, finding in the literature of the past a spring-board for the expression of their own ideas and feelings. Also, they continually mingle instances from antiquity with instances from their own experience. Despite their wide reading and their close contact with literary models they are alert observers of life and always maintain their own freedom of thought. Montaigne and La Fontaine belong to that rare family of bookish souls who have not been spoiled by books and who remain profoundly original because they believe in the value of their own existence.

Another reader of Montaigne, Molière, may have exerted considerable influence on the orientation of La Fontaine's early tales and fables. Born within a few months of one another, Molière and La Fontaine were almost exact contemporaries, a fact which may perhaps account for some of their affinities of temperament and taste. La Fontaine's famous letter to Maucroix, in 1661, describing the performance of *Les Fâcheux* at Vaux, and hailing Molière as the innovator of a fresh spirit in French letters, suggests by its wording—"Autrefois nous avons conclu"—that he had already seen one or two of Molière's earlier plays, three of which had been performed

at Vaux in the years 1660-61. Perhaps he had also witnessed *Les Précieuses ridicules*, whose success in 1659 marked the beginning of Molière's career as a playwright for the Parisian stage. He undoubtedly had real appreciation for Molière's art but, in spite of many legends which link their names, there is no evidence to show that the two men were closely associated with one another. Their paths crossed at Vaux, to be sure, and they had certain acquaintances in common—Boileau, who will seek out Molière but will misjudge La Fontaine, and Racine, until he broke his contract with Molière in 1665 and gave his *Alexandre* to a rival troupe—but they have left no traces of prolonged personal or professional contact. In 1673 La Fontaine lamented Molière's death in a clever epitaph which seems perfunctory but may perhaps conceal some muted emotion:

Sous ce tombeau gisent Plaute et Térence,  
Et cependant le seul Molière y git.  
Leurs trois talents ne formaient qu'un esprit  
Dont le bel art réjouissait la France.  
Ils sont partis! et j'ai peu d'espérance  
De les revoir. Malgré tous nos efforts,  
Pour un long temps, selon toute apparence,  
Térence, et Plaute, et Molière sont morts. (OD, 607)

Whether La Fontaine lost a friend is hard to say, but he knew that his country had lost an incomparable artist, one who (like himself) was rooted in antiquity yet expressed all that was best and most permanent in French character and manners.

It would be a lengthy but fruitless task to enumerate all the similarities of theme and situation in the writings of Molière and La Fontaine. Obviously enough, both authors are students of society and make their works the mirror of life at every social level. Rich and poor, aristocrats and peasants, professors and tradesmen, lawyers and doctors, all play their part in both of these comedies "à cent actes divers." The playwright and the fabulist, both of them superlative humorists, view the world with amused detachment and are quick to make fun of everything that is pompous or ridiculous. They teach the same lessons of reasonableness, naturalness, and tolerance, although Molière is somewhat more consistent and more earnest, and La Fontaine more indulgent, more epicurean in his tastes. One can find countless parallels in their thought but almost no sign of borrowing or influence. There may be some connection,

perhaps merely a common source, between one of La Fontaine's tales (I, 11) and an intermezzo of *Le Malade imaginaire* but, aside from this, the two great comic geniuses went their own ways, exploited different materials, and seemingly paid rather little attention to one another.

Yet La Fontaine beyond all doubt admired Molière very strongly and, without knowing it, may have learned many things from him. An ardent lover of the theater, which would always tempt him but never bring him success, La Fontaine must have followed Molière's triumphant career with attentive and envious eyes. If he lacked the talent for long compositions and met with failure in his every effort to write a full-size play, he acquired very quickly—perhaps aided by the comedies of Molière—the art of dramatizing brief anecdotes, transforming them into miniature comedies or tragedies. La Fontaine's skillful theatrical technique is evident everywhere in his tales and fables—in his sketching of settings or backdrops, his portrayal of human types by gestures and tones of voice, his way of bringing actors face to face so as to spotlight their tensions or conflicts, his subtle contrasts and changes of pace, above all his use of dialogue to advance the plot and reveal the motives of his characters. Not merely a poet and a story-teller, he is a dramatist with the gift for creating scenes which happen before our eyes as though enacted on a stage. The reader can watch and listen to the actors, can almost reach out his hand and touch them. The element of stagecraft in La Fontaine's art, the importance of which has never been sufficiently emphasized, can be studied best in the successive form, dramatic then narrative, of *Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard*. He wrote this first as a farce, coming very close to the spirit and methods of Molière, and a few years later reworked the same material to create *Le Savetier* (or *Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry*, I, 5), one of his earliest "nouvelles en vers."

A tangy country flavor pervades *Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard*. The title refers to a square in Château-Thierry where idlers used to gather to exchange jokes and bits of gossip. The manuscript in which the play has survived,<sup>4</sup> found among the papers of Talle-  
mant des Réaux, lists the names of eight friends of La Fontaine at Château-Thierry who interpreted the various roles in some sort of amateur performance there. An allusion to the forthcoming marriage of Louis XIV suggests that the comedy was written and per-

formed between the last months of 1659 and June, 1660. It was precisely at this time, during the winter of 1659-60, that Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* was being played, with great success. Molière's satire of provincial snobbishness seems to have been preying on La Fontaine's mind, for he half-mentions it on two occasions, first in his prologue, in the stanzas which begin:

Qui ne rirait des précieux?  
Qui ne rirait de ces coquettes?

—and again in a reference to the famous comedian who was then being applauded in *Les Précieuses*:

Le meunier semble un Jodelet  
Fariné d'étrange manière . . .<sup>5</sup>

But La Fontaine's subject, inspired by some local incident or legend, is simply a gay practical joke and is treated more in the manner of Molière's brief farces, such as *Sganarelle*, or those which have come down from the medieval theater. More exactly, it is a comic ballet but, since no information remains concerning the music and dancing, it has survived in the form of a fast-moving farce, no more than a dozen pages long.

A gay prologue, which contains echoes of Rabelais as well as of Molière, sets forth the essentials of the plot—the duping of a rich merchant who makes love to the wife of a shoemaker who owes him money:

“Faites-moi votre favori,  
Lui dit-il, et laissez-moi faire.”  
La femme en parle à son mari,  
Qui répond, songeant à l'affaire:

“Ma femme, il vous faut l'abuser,  
Car c'est un homme un peu crédule,  
Sous l'espérance d'un baiser,  
Faites-lui rendre ma cédule.

Déchirez-la de bout en bout,  
Car la somme en est assez grande.  
Toussez après; ce n'est pas tout:  
Toussez si haut qu'on vous entende.

“Il ne faut pas tarder beaucoup,  
De crainte de quelque infortune;

Toussez, tousez encore un coup,  
Et tousez plutôt deux fois qu'une."

Ainsi fut dit, ainsi fut fait.  
En certain coin l'époux demeure,  
Le galant vient frisque et de hait,  
La dame tousse à temps et heure. (OD, 347-348)

This metrical scheme is maintained throughout the play's eight scenes or "entrées" but without becoming monotonous, since stanzas and lines are split up into very lively dialogue among the various characters. In addition to the central trio La Fontaine provides vivid glimpses of several incidental actors: two wheat sifters, a spritely notary who draws up the contract by which the shoemaker obtains wheat on credit from the merchant, a pastry cook who serves refreshments during the seduction scene, and a miller and his ass (a talking ass who seems to be a forerunner of the animals in the fables). The complaints of the embittered miller reveal a peasant drawn from life by an artist in touch with the soil:

Celui-là ment bien par ses dents,  
Qui nous fait larrons comme diables:  
Diables sont noirs, meuniers sont blancs,  
Mais tous les deux sont misérables . . .

Ai-je un mulet, il est quinteux,  
Et je ne suis pas mieux en mule;  
Si j'ai quelque âne, il est boiteux,  
Au lieu d'avancer il recule. (OD, 353-354)

Scene follows scene in quick succession, with the terse wit and forthright simplicity of an old farce or *fabliau*, in singing lines which seem made for marionettes. In a matter of moments the note is torn up, the wife coughs, the shoemaker comes to her rescue, and the curtain falls. One of the brightest gems of La Fontaine's art, *Les Rieurs* proves very clearly that he could have followed in the footsteps of Molière and become a writer of comedies, had he been willing to continue in this direction. Instead, he turned to genres which he could claim as his own, the tale in verse and the fable.

While composing his first tales La Fontaine had the idea, with his customary economy of effort, of salvaging *Les Rieurs*—since the play had not been printed and was unknown outside Château-Thierry—and utilizing the plot a second time. He suppresses all the

secondary characters and relates very swiftly the shoemaker's negotiations with the merchant and the latter's proposal to the shoemaker's wife. After a few words of dialogue between wife and suitor La Fontaine comes to the heart of his story—the instructions which Blaise, the shoemaker, gives his wife—and here he follows, sometimes word for word, the corresponding passage in the prologue of *Les Rieurs*:

Blaise lui dit: "Parbieu! femme, il nous faut,  
 Sans coup férir, rattraper notre somme.  
 Tout de ce pas allez dire à cet homme  
 Qu'il peut venir, et que je n'y suis point.  
 Je veux ici me cacher tout à point.  
 Avant le coup demandez la cédule;  
 De la donner je ne crois qu'il recule;  
 Puis tousserez, afin de m'avertir,  
 Mais haut et clair, et plutôt deux fois qu'une.  
 Lors de mon coin vous me verrez sortir  
 Incontinent, de crainte de fortune." (I, 5)

No sooner said than done. The anecdote is swiftly completed but now La Fontaine adds a new twist at the end: a discussion of the events by several of the shoemaker's friends. Someone tells the wife that she missed a good opportunity, "Mieux eût valu tousser après l'affaire," and she replies, with a sly insinuation, that she is not so clever as certain other women:

"Je pense bien, continua la belle,  
 Qu'en pareil cas Madame en use ainsi:  
 Mais quoi! chacun n'est pas si sage qu'elle."

Thus evolved, from happenings in real life at Château-Thierry into a little comedy, then by a further distillation into a poem less than 50 lines in length, *Le Savetier* represents very well La Fontaine's earliest manner as a writer of tales in verse. It contains the germ of many tendencies which will be developed in his later tales: his rapidity as a narrator, his very limited use of descriptive details, his introduction of dialogue to dramatize the events, his indulgence in provincial or slightly archaic expressions, his playful underlining of suggestive scenes, his fondness for making fun of women, his abrupt endings which have an ironic or epigrammatic turn. The composition of *Le Savetier* cannot be precisely dated but in all likelihood this tale and several others were written around 1663



or 1664 when La Fontaine, no longer the favorite poet of a powerful Maecenas, was seeking out fresh and novel materials with which to impress the literary world and relaunch his interrupted career.

### 3. *The Manuscript Contes.*

La Fontaine's pleasure trip, or exile, to Limoges did not last more than a few months. Leaving his uncle there he returned to Paris, by the end of 1663 presumably, for he obtained in January of 1664 a "privilège" for his first volume of tales in verse. Together with his literary activities in these years La Fontaine devoted himself seriously to the problem of finding new friends and patrons. It was around this time that he began to frequent members of the Bouillon family, particularly the young duchess—still in her teens in 1664—whose daring tastes are said to have encouraged his penchant for licentious verse. He also found favor, in a more austere quarter, with the dowager duchess of Orléans, Marguerite de Lorraine, the widow of Louis XIII's brother. This development was apparently in preparation while La Fontaine made his journey to Limousin, for his letters, full of praise for Gaston d'Orléans and Richelieu, seem almost the journal of a pilgrimage to certain shrines or monuments of Louis XIII's reign. Be this as it may, the good graces of Marguerite d'Orléans obtained the title of "écuyer" for La Fontaine in July of 1664—just two years after his unhappy experience of being condemned for "usurpation de noblesse"—and he joined the duchess's staff as a "gentilhomme servant" at the Luxembourg palace. The post, which he held until the death of his patroness in 1672, required little of his time and paid only a small stipend. It left him free to travel to Château-Thierry for his official functions there and offered him enough security—or prestige, or stability—so that he could embark on a literary program of unprecedented vigor and productivity. The pious, gloomy atmosphere of the Luxembourg palace seldom weighed him down and is scarcely at all reflected in his poetry.<sup>1</sup> With a gay heart he began writing tales in verse, fables, *Psyché*, poems, letters, always with two or three projects fermenting simultaneously in his mind, preparing the rich vintages of the next half-dozen years.

The chronological development of La Fontaine's tales, as of his

fables, can only be studied in rough approximations. Even so, the problem is complicated and lends itself to divergent interpretations. The order in which the tales were published is clearly established but has only a limited interest, for it does not correspond to the order of composition. This latter, when it can be determined, offers the best guide to the progress of his art, but at every step it is enmeshed with another factor which is no less significant: the evolution of his critical faculties and of his literary intentions, as revealed at successive dates in the prefaces which accompany each volume of tales.

Before attempting to trace La Fontaine's artistic growth in his early tales—the growth of his skill as poet and storyteller and also of his conception of the genre which he was seeking to formulate—one does well to recall, if only as convenient landmarks, the stages of their publication history. The first volume to appear, the *Nouvelles en vers tirées de Boccace et de l'Arioste par M. de L.F.*, bears an "achevé d'imprimer" dated December 10, 1664. This slim pamphlet contains two of La Fontaine's tales: *Le Cocu battu et content* and *Joconde*. Only one month later (on January 10, 1665) these two tales were printed again, together with eight others not previously published, in the *Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine*. The ten pieces, plus one which modern editors have added to the group, constitute Part I of the tales as the public knows them today. The following year, on January 21, 1666, thirteen new tales were published under the title *Deuxième partie des Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine*. Part II, in present-day editions, consists of these thirteen tales and three additional ones which came to light in a separate collection in 1667. Thus nearly all the early tales were published within the short space of fourteen months, from December of 1664 to January of 1666, but in three different volumes dated in turn 1664, 1665, and 1666.

The first tales won immediate success, a stroke of good luck which La Fontaine exploited by rushing further tales to the printer with all possible haste. Clearly enough, the month which expired between the partial and the complete edition of Part I did not allow him time to compose many new pieces, if any at all. He simply revised and released certain tales which he already had on hand, offering the public "ce qui me reste de ces bagatelles, afin de ne pas laisser refroidir la curiosité de les voir, qui est encore en son premier feu"

(*Contes*, I, Préface). Hence the tales published in 1665 seem to have been composed earlier than the two published in 1664, or earlier than one of them, *Joconde*, which, as several scholars have remarked, gives the impression of a later style or manner. This observation is confirmed by the manuscript copies of certain tales preserved in the papers of Conrart at the Arsenal library. The other tale printed in 1664 (*Le Cocu battu et content*) and also eight of the nine tales henceforth added to Part I are to be found grouped together in the manuscripts, as though they had been copied and sent to Conrart—perhaps submitted for him to criticize—all at the same time.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the order of the manuscripts in Conrart's collection is extremely chaotic and gives no clue to their dates, except what can be learned from the grouping of related pieces. But the manuscript text of these tales differs from the printed text in many small details and the variants prove quite conclusively that the manuscript version is earlier.<sup>3</sup> Before publishing these pieces La Fontaine corrected them and here and there improved the rhymes, polished the verses, or smoothed the sentence structure. Thus, by 1663, or possibly a year or two before, the author had written and sent to Conrart nine tales, his first concerted efforts in this genre.

His lack of confidence, his seeking of advice from friends, his fear of hostile critics, his postponement of publication, all this is characteristic of La Fontaine and accounts for his very slow emergence as a man of letters. When he finally gave his earliest tales to the public, in 1665, he discussed them in a preface which is very revealing yet rather mysterious. Who are the authors whom he mentions as "créatures de la cabale," saying that they take advantage of friendship to obtain a favorable reception for their works? Is he merely alluding to publicity practices, such as the dedication of books to influential people—an art which he himself would soon master—or is there some explanation which accounts better for his embittered tone? He is not seeking patronage, he says, but only trying to please the changing tastes of the public; he has learned that this is necessary from his own experience—a statement which may refer to the total failure of *L'Eunuque*, his only major work thus far published. This conviction that he must submit to reigning fashions rather than follow his own literary ideals and inclinations, a notion which recurs everywhere in his writings, cannot be branded

as hypocrisy or opportunism. If he felt that he had to entertain his readers and accept their demands it was because his modesty still made him underestimate his talents. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity (and in this instance he is quite correct) when he says that his works, *i.e.* these early tales, are not great masterpieces which can go counter to prevailing styles yet still win over the public: "Comme les miens sont fort éloignés d'un si haut degré de perfection, la prudence veut que je les garde en mon cabinet, à moins que de bien prendre mon temps pour les en tirer."

His preface indicates that he had not arrived at a clear conception of the tale in verse as a literary genre. Nothing more natural of course, since he was to evolve the genre himself in accordance with his own tastes and those of the public, without imitating previous models. Writers of amusing and licentious tales, particularly of tales in prose, have abounded in every literature from ancient times onward. But the tradition had seldom lent itself to poetry and, in seventeenth century France, had virtually disappeared except in scattered pages of a few realistic novels. La Fontaine had countless sources at his disposal—oriental, Greek and Latin, Italian, French—and like other storytellers he would not hesitate to borrow plots from his predecessors. The difficulty was to find an appropriate style. Should he tell the stories briefly or at length, objectively or personally, with overt realism or veiled innuendos, in polite or colloquial language, in what verse forms, with what degree of satire? These problems were to concern him greatly in the next few years but, at this point, he was only dimly aware of them. His comments on the earliest tales—the ones disinterred for the edition of 1665—are extremely casual and superficial: "Il y en a que j'ai étendus, et d'autres que j'ai accourcis, seulement pour diversifier et me rendre moins ennuyeux. On en trouvera même quelques-uns que j'ai prétendu mettre en épigrammes." Then, after noting that he has introduced a few other poems which are not tales at all, simply to fatten his book, he adds: "Je ne sais même si la variété n'était point plus à rechercher en cette rencontre qu'un assortissement si exact." And that is all.<sup>4</sup> Tales in verse can be short or long, they can even take the form of epigrams, the more variety the better.

These simple theories are almost adequate to embrace the poet's performance in his earliest tales. The group of nine tales in the

Conrart manuscript consists of the following compositions, listed here in the order in which they are given in modern editions:

- I, 2 *Richard Minutolo*
- I, 3 *Le Cocu battu et content*
- I, 4 *Le Mari confesseur*
- I, 5 *Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry*
- I, 6 *Conte tiré d'Athénée (La Vénus Callipyge)*
- I, 7 *Conte tiré d'Athénée (Les deux Amis)*
- I, 8 *Autre conte tiré d'Athénée (Le Glouton)*
- I, 10 *Conte du juge de Mesle*
- I, 11 *Conte d'un paysan qui avait offensé son seigneur*

One other tale in Part I, *Sœur Jeanne* (I,9) does not appear in the manuscript but can be considered with those which do; it was published separately in an undated "recueil collectif" and seems to have been composed around the same time as the manuscript tales, in the early sixteen sixties. The ten *contes* are written in regular meters, all but two of them being in verses of ten syllables. Three of them (I,2; I,3; I,11) run to over 100 lines in length but there are five (I,6-10) which are extremely short, 16 lines or less, and amount to single stanzas, usually with an epigrammatic *pointe* or witticism at the end. The brief anecdote in the form of an epigram, widely cultivated in *précieux* circles, was one of the starting points of La Fontaine's story telling art, one which he would soon leave far behind him. Another feature of these tales which suggests the influence of salons and the palace of Vaux is their heavy dosage of Marotic old-fashioned expressions, a device which La Fontaine would cling to for several years, then gradually abandon.

The tales possess considerable variety, as the poet claimed. One of them (I,6) is couched in indecent language, and it should be noted that La Fontaine refrained from publishing it, but several others are not even remotely suggestive or licentious. The subjects include not only love affairs of the usual crafty women, paramours, and cuckolds—types which La Fontaine would belabor far too much in his later tales—but also the preoccupations of a poor shoemaker, of a glutton, of a cynical judge, of a peasant and his master. The author has found material in various kinds of sources ranging from Boccaccio to Athenaeus, and on two occasions (I,5 and I,10) has reported events drawn from real life, a practice which he would rarely repeat. Diversity characterizes all of La Fontaine's works

but, in these early tales, it seems to arise less from his changing moods than from his inexperience and indecision. He is groping slowly forward, trying out various methods and manners, searching for the style where he can feel fully at home.

His uncertainty of touch gives these tales an air of crudeness or heaviness. The very short tales tend to be too bald and even coarse; the same subjects could be treated delicately, if embroidered at greater length. The charm of La Fontaine's personal remarks is also missing in most of the stories; he intervenes rarely and generally only in the closing lines to make a sort of farewell humorous commentary (I,2 and I,6). The tales of simple folk (I,5; I,10; I,11) possess great realness and a flavor of the native soil, which La Fontaine will tend to lose as he turns more and more to Italian sources, but one of them, *Le Paysan qui avait offensé son seigneur*, is too painful and violent to be amusing—like the cudgelings in some of Molière's farces. Only two tales (I,2 and I,3) have the lightness and grace which distinguish La Fontaine's later writings; nothing could be gayer than the seduction scene of *Richard Minutolo*, in a Neapolitan bathhouse; nothing could be more playful than the opening lines of *Le Cocu battu et content*:

N'a pas longtemps de Rome revenait  
 Certain cadet, qui n'y profita guère,  
 Et volontiers en chemin séjournait,  
 Quand par hasard le galant rencontra  
 Bon vin, bon gîte, et belle chambrière.  
 Avint qu'un jour, en un bourg arrêté,  
 Il vit passer une dame jolie,  
 Leste, pimpante, et d'un page suivie;  
 En la voyant, il en fut enchanté,  
 La convoita, comme bien savait faire.  
 Prou de pardons il avait rapporté;  
 De vertu peu: chose assez ordinaire.  
 La dame était de gracieux maintien,  
 De doux regard, jeune, fringante et belle,  
 Somme qu'enfin il ne lui manquait rien,  
 Fors que d'avoir un ami digne d'elle . . .

These two outstanding tales are both based on episodes in the *Decameron* and they point to the path which La Fontaine will soon follow. He will go to literary sources, Italian ones by preference, and borrow well-told stories which have stood the test of time. He

will find his freedom in imitation rather than in invention. Having no need to work out plots he will be able to focus all the resources of his art on details of narrative technique and poetic expression. First he will pause a while over Ariosto, then turn back to make another raid—this time on a wholesale scale—on Boccaccio, his perennial favorite.

#### 4. Ariosto—*Joconde*.

La Fontaine's knowledge of Italian literature was of course not limited to Ariosto and Boccaccio. He took advantage of available translations but could make his way in the original tongue, probably without much difficulty. He had read, or would eventually read, many collections of fables by Italian authors, some of them written in Latin, the work of such men as Abstemius, Faerno, Poggio, and Verdizotti, and would display considerable familiarity with certain Italian poets and storytellers. His well-known comments on this subject, in his *Épître à Huet*, ring with enthusiasm:

Je chéris l'Arioste et j'estime le Tasse;  
Plein de Machiavel, entêté de Boccace,  
J'en parle si souvent qu'on en est étourdi . . . (OD, 647)

But these lines date from 1687 and seem to reflect a fondness for Italian letters acquired in the latter half of his life. It is not until 1671, in Part III of his tales, that he begins to seem concerned with finding unexploited sources beyond the Alps. While continuing to draw upon Ariosto (III,4 and 13) and Boccaccio (III,1 and 5; IV,6, etc.), he would also tap a number of other Italian authors. He would take two stories from Girolamo Brusoni (III,6 and 7), one from the obscener pages of Aretino (IV,16), and two from the non-philosophical writings of Machiavelli (III,2 and V,7). He never alluded to, and perhaps did not know, Machiavelli's *Principe* and *Discorsi*. His phrase "j'estime le Tasse" seems rather reserved and contrasts with the extravagant acclaim which most contemporary French critics bestowed on Tasso. La Fontaine had presumably read *Gerusalemme liberata*, to judge from his references to it, in *Psyché* and afterwards (e.g. OD, 143, 147) but these references, while complimentary, are rather vague. He appears to have relished certain

sentimental and pastoral episodes involving the beautiful enchantress, Armida, but he may well have found the poem as a whole rather strained or over-majestic in scope and style. He neither imitated Tasso nor borrowed material from him and seldom if ever echoed him unconsciously. Thus La Fontaine, in the years when he was composing his first *contes*, took a deliberate or professional interest in very few Italian authors: Marino (in connection with *Adonis*); Boccaccio; a certain Giordano Bruno Nolano, whose comedy, *Il Candelaio* (or else its French translation)<sup>1</sup> may have inspired one tale (I,11); and Ariosto, the source of his *Joconde* (I,1).

La Fontaine had wandered happily through the maze-like complications of the *Orlando furioso*. His frequent reminiscences—in his ballade “Je me plais aux livres d’amour” (*OD*, 586) and here and there in his tales (II,14; V,5)—indicate that he knew the poem quite well and had a warm opinion of it. He probably enjoyed it as he would a novel, particularly if he read it in translation, and had less feeling for its poetic richness and diversity than for its tangled vegetation of sentimental stories and episodes. The intertwined love affairs, the chivalric atmosphere, the duels and jousts, the epic combat scenes, the magic spells and potions, the *précieux* portraits and imagery—all this must have appealed to an admirer of D’Urfé and Mlle de Scudéry. But La Fontaine had a special reason for liking the *Orlando furioso*, a spiritual kinship for Ariosto’s personal verve, for his touches of satire and skepticism, for his indulgence in voluptuous, licentious writing. La Fontaine borrowed only three stories from Ariosto and each time, as in the case of *Joconde*, he looked for material which was spicy and which offered possibilities for satirizing the opposite sex.

The history of his *Joconde* (*Contes*, I,1) is still veiled in mystery. The idea of rendering the 28th canto of the *Orlando furioso* in French verse did not belong to La Fontaine; it came first to a writer named Bouillon, no relation to the duke and duchess, who died in 1662, but whose version of Ariosto’s famous story appeared soon afterward, in the spring of 1663. If he had not died he perhaps would have received gentler treatment in the controversy, or conspiracy, which followed. Many years later Boileau, in a conversation with Brossette, is reported to have said that La Fontaine found Bouillon’s *Joconde* “fort mal bâti” and that he decided to try his hand at the same subject. If this account be accurate Bouillon



should receive some credit, at least, for leading La Fontaine to one of his most fortunate discoveries. The fabulist's own *Joconde* may have been passed around in manuscript as early as 1663. When he finally published it, at the end of 1664, in a slim volume marked only with his initials and containing an *Avertissement* expressed in the most modest terms, he made no mention of Bouillon either as a rival or as a source of inspiration. At this time had the quarrel over the two versions of *Joconde* already begun, and had he timed his book to take advantage of it, or was it the appearance of his book which ignited fires in the two camps? Only a few weeks later, in the issue of January 26, 1665, the *Journal des savants* made an impartial discussion of the question, noting that the two treatments of *Joconde* have given rise to "beaucoup de disputes" and that "Beaucoup de gens ont pris part dans cette contestation, et elle s'est tellement échauffée qu'il s'est fait des gageures considérables en faveur de l'un et de l'autre" (pp. 42-43). It is not clear, despite various comments by Brossette and Brienne, who the bettors were and, least of all, in what way or on what authority such wagers could have been settled. One wonders, also, whether the dispute may not have been bred artificially, for its publicity value, since the two *Joconde* stories offer no grounds for comparison except for their use of a common source. The one by Bouillon can be defended only as a translation; it follows the text of Ariosto quite closely but it is a sing-song, monotonous, humorless piece of writing, devoid of literary merit. The one by La Fontaine—and this must have been instantly recognized—is a delightful work of art, witty, poetic, and radiant with personal charm.

At what moment did Boileau step in to knock down his man of straw? It seems fairly well established that he is the author of the *Dissertation sur Joconde* which may have been circulated (but how widely?) by 1664, before the publication of La Fontaine's tale, but which did not appear in print until 1669, and then anonymously. The *Dissertation*,<sup>2</sup> in the form of a letter, seeks or pretends to reassure an unidentified gentleman who has bet "cent pistoles" on La Fontaine, and perhaps is intended to furnish him a battery of arguments with which to win his wager. Boileau mentions, very scornfully, certain statements of "votre ami," Bouillon's backer, a fact which suggests the existence of a missing document in the case: a letter or pamphlet setting forth the points in favor of Bouillon.

Boileau disposes of Bouillon in a series of brief, devastating blasts and brashly devotes the longer part of his treatise to a demonstration that La Fontaine's *Joconde* is vastly superior not merely to the one by Bouillon—that goes without saying—but also to the Italian version by Ariosto. This claim is excessive but it is based on detailed study of the two texts and reveals a thorough, intimate understanding of La Fontaine's literary aims and methods of workmanship. Which suggests several perplexing questions: did not La Fontaine perhaps collaborate in the writing of the *Dissertation*, or at least provide his friend with information on how and why he had made certain changes in Ariosto's story? Or, another possibility, had Boileau perhaps helped in the composition of *Joconde*, offering La Fontaine advice on how to treat his materials? La Fontaine's close associates, Maucroix and others, played an important part in shaping his literary career, for he invariably sought friendly suggestions and criticism for every project, before risking publication. At this significant moment, as he was writing his first major tale in verse, his literary confessor may well have been Boileau.

This close relationship between the two men did not continue very long. They had probably known one another since around 1660, presumably through certain acquaintances like Furetière, and for several years—before Boileau became a stern moralist and literary legislator—the two aspiring poets had certain interests in common and may have felt some ties of friendship. At the beginning of 1666 Boileau and Racine are said to have accepted an invitation from La Fontaine to visit him at Château-Thierry. After that date, however, and until La Fontaine's final years of life, one looks in vain for any sign of sympathy or close attachment between him and Boileau. Their professional paths will cross on countless occasions but their attitudes to one another will usually reveal indifference or lack of mutual understanding, sometimes even hostility. Boileau had no appreciation for La Fontaine's fables (as proved so clearly by his two dreary, brief efforts in this genre), he competed with La Fontaine for admission to the French Academy, he aroused the open enmity of several of La Fontaine's patrons and dearest friends. Even his admiration for *Joconde* did not last; he eventually came to describe it as a "conte odieux."<sup>3</sup> He never authorized the publication of his *Dissertation* and doubtless regretted

writing it. And, if he aided La Fontaine at all in the selection of his subject or the composition of his poem, that also was a youthful error which he must have repented.

As La Fontaine worked at his *Joconde* he undoubtedly felt that he must avoid repeating the methods and errors of Bouillon. Since his predecessor had written in regular verse, an endless series of eight-syllable lines in rhymed couplets, he chose *vers libres* and took unusual care to display his versatility in this medium. In other respects, however, Bouillon had done little more than translate Ariosto, in a remarkably pedestrian, uninspired manner. La Fontaine's desire to differ from Bouillon forced him to take drastic liberties with the text of Ariosto. His infidelity to sources, already a strongly developed characteristic, becomes far more marked in *Joconde*; this is his declaration of independence which will guide him in all his future tales and fables. Not that he made many changes in the facts of the plot (despite Boileau's heavy emphasis on certain altered details). It was an old story, a good story, and he was content to accept all its salient features as found in Ariosto's skillful rendering of it. Two noble husbands, Astolphe and Joconde, each finding that his wife has betrayed him for a worthless lackey, set out together on a career of deliberate seduction. After various conquests, all over Europe, they find a pretty girl, an innkeeper's daughter, and strike a bargain to share her favors. But two men are not enough for her; when they are asleep she entertains a third, all in the same bed. Upon discovering this crowning example of feminine treachery Astolphe and Joconde decide that they may as well resign themselves, since all women are alike, and they return to their own wives. This outline applies equally well to the versions of Ariosto and La Fontaine. But here the similarity ends, for La Fontaine has completely transformed the tone of his model.

Ariosto had tried to redeem the implausibility of the story by accumulating precise details in telling it. But La Fontaine suppressed all the realistic touches, such as itineraries, descriptions, and historical allusions, and treated the subject as pure, preposterous fancy. He refuses to justify or explain improbable events:

Ce n'est pas mon métier de cajoler personne.  
Je le rends comme on me le donne;  
Et l'Arioste ne ment pas.

Si l'on voulait à chaque pas  
 Arrêter un conteur d'histoire,  
 Il n'aurait jamais fait . . .

This light approach is sustained by continual joking; almost every sentence contains some witticism, or playful exaggeration, or amusing turn of thought. Satire of women, the very essence of the story, becomes more prominent in La Fontaine, but also much lighter and even affectionate. Sometimes he smiles quite openly, in many little personal comments on the charms and trickery of women, and sometimes far more subtly, as in the overacted lyricism of Joconde's wife, bidding farewell to the husband she is about to deceive:

"Crois-moi, ne quitte point les hôtes de tes bois,  
 Ces fertiles vallons, ces ombrages si cois,  
 Enfin moi, qui devrais me nommer la première.  
 Mais ce n'est plus le temps; tu ris de mon amour;  
 Va, cruel, va montrer ta beauté singulière;  
 Je mourrai, je l'espère, avant la fin du jour."

Then, lest this seem too serious or too poetic, he quickly comes down to earth, pointing out that Joconde believed his wife's words but that he himself (Moi, qui sais ce que c'est que l'esprit d'une femme) would not have been fooled. He never used a plain statement when an innuendo or sly hint would serve his purpose. In this technique he found his solution to the problem of pornography. Ariosto had treated the sensual scenes forthrightly and realistically, furnishing details which some editors have felt obliged to expurgate. La Fontaine could scarcely follow the example of Ariosto—for his readers were touchy—and had no inclination to do so, anyhow. He took particular delight in the bedroom comedy and gave it new emphasis, adding, for example, a discussion of the girl's virginity or lack thereof, but he recoiled from obscene words and turned the bawdy passages into a graceful game of hide and seek. His rejection of coarseness in favor of suggestiveness has been attacked and defended by various moralists, according to the tastes of their times. In the sixteen-sixties it seemed quite normal and offended no one, not even Boileau.

The author of the *Dissertation sur Joconde* should be applauded not only for whatever encouragement and publicity he offered La Fontaine but also for a critical appraisal of *Joconde* which has never been superseded. In spite of his manifest unfairness to both Ariosto

and Bouillon, he rightly sensed the subtle charm of La Fontaine, who was still a newcomer in the French literary world, and assessed his friend's abilities with an acumen which more than compensates for his later, tight-corseted condescension:

Un homme formé, comme je vois bien qu'il l'est, au goût de Térence et de Virgile, ne se laisse pas emporter à ces extravagances italiennes, et ne s'écarte pas ainsi de la route du bon sens. Tout ce qu'il dit est simple et naturel: et ce que j'estime surtout en lui, c'est une certaine naïveté de langage que peu de gens connaissent, et qui fait pourtant tout l'agrément du discours; c'est cette naïveté inimitable qui a été tant estimée dans les écrits d'Horace et de Térence. . . . En effet, c'est ce *molle* et ce *facetum* qu'Horace a attribué à Virgile, et qu'Apollon ne donne qu'à ses favoris. . . . Ces sortes de beautés sont de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point. C'est ce je ne sais quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'aurait ni grâce ni beauté.

Boileau is undeniably right. For *Joconde*, or the first half of it, before the more lascivious pages, has the simplicity, the restrained lyrical touches, the canny humor of La Fontaine's best fables.

### 5. *Theory of the Tale in Verse.*

*Joconde* was published in rather unusual circumstances. It appeared at the end of 1664 in a small volume containing one other tale by La Fontaine and one by Saint-Evremond, *La Matrone d'Éphèse*, this one borrowed from Petronius and executed in prose with a few lines of verse mixed in. Did the publisher put together this joint volume or did the two authors conceive the idea? Saint-Evremond had been living in exile for several years but surely La Fontaine had made his acquaintance at Vaux and, quite conceivably, had stayed in close touch with him by correspondence. Did Saint-Evremond perhaps lend a hand in advising La Fontaine on the composition of *Joconde*, or even in the preparation of the mysterious *Dissertation sur Joconde*? Whatever the answers to these questions may be it seems fairly certain that La Fontaine had two models, Bouillon and Saint-Evremond, to encourage him in his choice of a literary genre. Their example added to the favorable reaction of friends who had seen his manuscripts enabled him to sense that licentious tales were becoming popular, and to plunge in while the

current was turning in his favor. But not without a further experiment to test the tastes of his audience. Along with *Joconde* he published an earlier tale done in quite a different manner: *Le Cocu battu et content*. This was a last-minute addition, for *Le Cocu* is not mentioned in the *privilège* and appears in the volume with a separate set of page numbers. Finally, to obtain as much information as possible, La Fontaine introduced a short *Avertissement* where he discusses the two styles he has attempted and asks to learn the preference of his readers. This touch of modern advertising, this poll of public opinion, may seem subservient or hypocritical, yet was all done quite sincerely, out of natural modesty, indecision, and an ardent desire to please.

The text is an important one and does much to explain the character and development of La Fontaine's art. As he says, he has experimented quite deliberately with two different poetic devices to endow his tales with lifelike naturalness and color:

L'auteur a voulu éprouver lequel caractère est le plus propre pour rimer des contes. Il a cru que les vers irréguliers ayant un air qui tient beaucoup de la prose, cette manière pourrait sembler la plus naturelle, et par conséquent la meilleure. D'autre part aussi le vieux langage, pour les choses de cette nature, a des grâces que celui de notre siècle n'a pas. Les *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, les vieilles traductions de Boccace et des *Amadis*, Rabelais, nos anciens poètes, nous en fournissent des preuves infaillibles. L'auteur a donc tenté ces deux voies sans être encore certain laquelle est la bonne. . . .

Thus the two tales are said to represent these somewhat arbitrary alternatives: one in modern language and mixed meters, the other in regular lines enlivened by old-fashioned syntax and vocabulary. But La Fontaine, luckily, could not cling very long to rigid theories.

Free verse as employed in *Joconde* was of course not invented or even popularized by La Fontaine. Growing out of free stanza forms like the *madrigal*, perhaps with a backward glance at the varied meters of Italian pastoral poetry, it was cultivated quite widely toward the middle of the seventeenth century, in the gallantries of Sarasin and many another *précieux* poet and in certain lighter genres such as the ballet and "pièce à machines." In the stanzas of *Andromède* (1650) and again at length in *Agésilas* (1666) Corneille did some experimenting with lines of different lengths, as did Molière in *Amphitryon* (1668). The virtue of free verse, according to seventeenth-century critics, was that it resembled prose. La

Fontaine said this and so did Corneille in his "Examen" for *Andromède*. The author of the *Dissertation sur Joconde* expressed the same idea when he compared La Fontaine to Horace and Terence in their efforts to achieve everyday simplicity, "jusqu'à rompre pour cela la mesure de leurs vers." But this naïve notion—which considers poetry as something regular, prose as irregular, confusing prosiness with poetic flexibility—could not weigh heavily on a born poet. La Fontaine's great originality was to transform free verse into an artistic instrument, removing it from prose into the realm of the most delicately wrought poetry, and to take personal possession of it, definitively, with a claim no future poet could equal.

Without attempting to study his versification—a vast subject in itself, only partially explored in the excellent chapters by Gohin—we must pause to define, very briefly, his use of *vers libres* in the tales and fables. The label of *vers libres* may, of course, be applied to lines in regular meters but with random rhymes. In this sense it could be claimed that all of his tales, with the exception of one in rhymed couplets (II,2), have irregularities of rhyme and therefore represent a type of free verse. But La Fontaine, along with most other French poets, conceived *vers libres* as lines in two or more meters, usually without a fixed scheme of rhymes, and not divisible into successive identical stanzas. La Fontaine employed irregular meters with great restraint, limiting himself mainly to lines of twelve and eight syllables and introducing other rhythms only on rare occasions for the sake of variety and to create special effects. His dexterity lies elsewhere: in the complex interplay of rhymes, in evocative combinations of sounds, in the use of pauses and run-on lines to afford rhythmic gradations and contrasts, in the linking of dissimilar or dissonant stanza forms, in a staccato flow of thought which dances in and out of step with the metrical pattern.

It is not known whether or not readers reacted unfavorably to the versification of *Joconde* but, for some reason, La Fontaine tended to abandon free verse in his future tales, setting over four fifths of them in even lengthed lines. Regular meters doubtless required less labor and perhaps he chose them to save time, so that he could satisfy quickly the demands of his public. At least he generally reserved *vers libres* for certain more fanciful and more ambitious tales, like *Joconde*, to which he attached considerable importance, such as *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* (II,14) and *La*

*Coupe enchantée* (III,4). In his fables, however, he took an opposite course: free verse almost always, in 238 fables out of a total of 243. Here he may have made a concession, at first, to Patru and other well-meaning friends who insisted that fables should be written in prose. It was hard to escape the prevailing idea that free verse resembled everyday speech.

La Fontaine's other realistic device, archaic language, also became less pronounced in his later tales. After *Le Cocu battu et content* and one or two other pieces in the volume of 1665, he seldom made any effort to write in sustained *vieux langage* but began sprinkling throughout his compositions—sometimes rather generously and sometimes less so—expressions which were old-fashioned (and also provincial or colloquial), employing them deliberately to achieve an earthy, familiar tone. He would do this in both tales and fables and—although he usually indulged in somewhat racier, more archaic diction in the tales, feeling more confidence, as he said, when following in the footsteps of “nos vieux poètes” (*Contes*, II, Préface)—he would soon forget his theory that the style of Marot should be confined to poems in regular meters. Even in the modern language of *Joconde* he made exceptions: a number of words and phrases which he seems to have recalled from sixteenth-century authors. The ideas announced in his *Avertissement* were tentative and experimental, but none the less significant. Instead of choosing one technique and rejecting the other, La Fontaine learned something from both, modified them, amalgamated them, and evolved from them the two adjacent styles—which touch and overlap at many points—of his future tales and fables.

He gave much thought to these and other artistic problems as he was preparing *Joconde* and the tales of Part II. His volumes published in 1665 and 1666 each carried a *Préface* where he aired his theories, answering critics, citing authorities, and seeking to forestall further objections. In 1665 his main concern was to have the subject matter of his tales accepted. Knowing that he would be charged with licentiousness he insisted very forcefully that this was an indispensable characteristic of the genre:

Je dis hardiment que la nature du conte le voulait ainsi. . . . L'on ne me saurait condamner que l'on ne condamne aussi l'Arioste devant moi, et les anciens devant l'Arioste. . . . Qui voudrait réduire Boccace à la même pudeur que Virgile ne ferait assurément



ment rien qui vaille, et pécherait contre les lois de la bienséance, en prenant à tâche de les observer. Car, afin que l'on ne s'y trompe pas, en matière de vers et de prose, l'extrême pudeur et la bienséance sont deux choses bien différentes. (*Contes*, I, Préface)

He is willing to observe certain limits, *i.e.* to avoid crude language, but demands the fullest freedom in his choice of materials. Since such tales deal traditionally with illicit love and the frailties of women he claims the right to do the same, holding the fair sex up to constant ridicule.

But all this in a spirit of fun. His licentiousness is not only appropriate but wholesome, his satire is harmless and inoffensive, because they are intended as an amusing game. The gayety of his tales (and their implausibility, as he adds in an afterthought), should absolve him from any charges of immorality:

S'il y a quelque chose dans nos écrits qui puisse faire impression sur les âmes, ce n'est nullement la gaieté de ces contes. . . . Qui ne voit que ceci est jeu, et par conséquent ne peut porter coup? Il ne faut pas avoir peur que les mariages en soient à l'avenir moins fréquents, et les maris plus forts sur leurs gardes. On me peut encore objecter . . . qu'il y a des absurdités [dans ces contes], et pas la moindre teinture de vraisemblance. Je réponds que . . . ce n'est ni le vrai ni le vraisemblable qui font la beauté et la grâce de ces choses-ci; c'est seulement la manière de les conter.

This argument's validity may be disputed (especially in the case of certain later tales which aim primarily at suggestiveness) but it applies very well to those of the sixteen-sixties, the work of a scrupulous artist eager to win approval from the public. One of La Fontaine's most faithful English readers, Lord Byron, would make the same plea in speaking of *Joconde* (and also his own *Don Juan*): "Lust is a serious passion and cannot be excited by the ludicrous."<sup>1</sup> As both authors claim, a story can be bawdy yet still a delightful work of art. All the better if its materials are far-fetched or wholly unbelievable. Verisimilitude, the theme on which classical critics kept harping, could be utterly disregarded, as La Fontaine shrewdly noted. Why bother to explain backgrounds, describe situations, or paint life-like characters? All that mattered was the "manière de conter." Unlike the fables, which possess considerable realism and speak constantly to the senses, the tales depend for their effectiveness almost entirely on their gay, graceful, chatty narrative style.

Hence the poet's great preoccupation with ways to make his style more natural. The art of the tales consists of relating improbable events in a playful, conversational manner, of making the reader feel that he is listening to the voice and watching the smile of a supremely likable storyteller.

During the year 1665, a year of intense creative activity, La Fontaine kept pondering these theories and, when he prepared Part II of the *Contes* for publication in early 1666, he wrote another *Préface* to discuss and amplify certain points in his program. Unaware that he will keep returning to tales all his life he announces this collection as the "derniers ouvrages de cette nature qui partiront des mains de l'auteur," (for by now he was doubtless working on the first volume of fables), and takes this last opportunity to justify certain "hardiesses" and "licences." But he says not a word about the pornography of his tales; he had won his public and knew that he stood on safe ground. He is referring simply to his liberties in observing the rules of versification: rules for "enjambement," rhyme, hiatus, elision, etc. Apparently he had been criticized for his air of carelessness and familiarity and wanted to make sure that his "négligences" were accepted as intentional:

Il faut laisser les narrations étudiées pour les grands sujets, et ne pas faire un poème épique des aventures de Renaud d'Ast [*Contes*, II, 5]. Quand celui qui a rimé ces nouvelles y aurait apporté tout le soin et l'exactitude qu'on lui demande, outre que ce soin s'y remarquerait d'autant plus qu'il y est moins nécessaire, . . . encore l'auteur n'aurait-il pas satisfait au principal point, qui est d'attacher le lecteur, de le réjouir, d'attirer malgré lui son attention, de lui plaire enfin: car, comme l'on sait, le secret de plaire ne consiste pas toujours en l'ajustement, ni même en la régularité; il faut du piquant et de l'agréable, si l'on veut toucher. (*Contes*, II, *Préface*)

Then he evokes the names of Marot and Saint-Gelais, and Voiture's poetry written in imitation of them, but this time without mentioning their "vieux langage." His ideas on this subject have undergone a change. He seems to understand now, and rightly so, that the charm of these poets results less from their outdated vocabulary and syntax than from their familiar manner and their easy-going, unsophisticated verse. He cites them here as poets of studied carelessness, who could be blamed for the same irregularities which he himself has cultivated. This is a page which might well have been

borne in mind by certain authors, such as Gourmont and Valéry, who have condemned the "unpoetic" facility of La Fontaine's style in the tales. But he has not lacked defenders, either, especially poets with something of his own spirit, like Banville and Musset. The latter attempted at times to recapture the manner of La Fontaine's tales but admitted, in the prologue to *Silvia*, that it was not an easy task:

Car c'est beaucoup que d'essayer ce style  
Tant oublié, qui fut jadis si doux,  
Et qu'aujourd'hui l'on croit facile.

Another freedom which La Fontaine demands, in his preface, is the right to plunder any source, no matter how famous or obscure, and to treat it in any way his fancy dictates. This is the usual classical doctrine of imitation, which all authors and critics accepted, particularly when ancient or relatively remote models were being exploited. But La Fontaine felt it necessary again and again to remind his readers—apparently because he borrowed tales from authors who were comparatively modern or close to home—that he was no copyist or translator but an artist of real originality. He would say this in various discussions of his work and even in the tales themselves, as in *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* (Je me suis écarté de mon original) and *La Servante justifiée*:

Voici le fait, quiconque en soit l'auteur:  
J'y mets du mien selon les occurrences,  
C'est ma coutume; et, sans telles licences,  
Je quitterais la charge de conteur. (II, 6)

The preface of 1666 continues with an explanation of certain principles which the author has observed in refashioning his sources. Generally he makes his tales shorter than their prototypes, not for the sake of brevity, however, but for simplicity and clarity. A tale, he explains, must have an uncomplicated pattern, free of unnecessary episodes, and it must have a straightforward development which the reader can follow very easily. He would eventually modify this idea, in his later tales, and make humorous digressions one of their main sources of interest. But here he says that he must spare his audience as much effort as possible, offering it "des plaisirs sans peine." Finally, he adds, he has changed the outcome of certain tales so that they would end amusingly and happily: "Il a cru que

dans ces sortes de contes chacun devait être content à la fin: cela plaît toujours au lecteur. . . ." This remark should have saved La Fontaine from the charge, so often leveled at him, that he failed to appreciate and reproduce what was serious or tragic in certain of his models, particularly the *Decameron*. The truth is, simply, that he had different artistic purposes from the authors whom he imitated and that he wrote for a different public.

In making these points La Fontaine has elaborated and extended very logically his theory announced a year before: that the tale in verse should be a gay bit of entertainment, a well-told story with no pretention except to afford pleasure. After a slow and faltering start he has now reached a coherent and well-rounded conception of the genre at which he is working. His preface has a confident tone and the author takes pride in the fact that "il s'est véritablement engagé dans une carrière toute nouvelle." The first flush of success has conquered his timidity. And he has good reason to boast, for the tales of 1666, inspired mainly by Boccaccio, include several of the finest and merriest compositions which would ever flow from his pen.

#### 6. Boccaccio—Part II of the *Contes*.

It has been seen that La Fontaine began borrowing from Boccaccio quite early, finding in him the plots of the two most distinguished tales (1,2 and 3) among those which he had submitted to Conrart. One of them, *Le Cocu battu et content* appeared in the experimental edition of 1664 and perhaps won greater applause than *Joconde*. At least, for whatever reason, the author immediately sought out the *Decameron* again and made it his principal source book. In January of 1665, when he published Part I of the *Contes*, he was already adapting various tales by Boccaccio and in his Preface expressed regret that they were not yet finished: "J'avais résolu de ne consentir à l'impression de ces contes qu'après que j'y pourrais joindre ceux de Boccace que sont le plus à mon goût. . . ." But the pressure of circumstances made him abandon this resolution; the stories from Boccaccio were not made public until the beginning of 1666 in Part II of the *Contes*. Seven of the thirteen tales in this volume are based wholly on Boccaccio, with the others

coming from a wide range of French story collections. From this point onward, in each succeeding volume of tales, La Fontaine would never lose sight of the *Decameron*. (His indebtedness is of course particularly strong in Part IV where he revels in suggestive situations and anti-clerical themes.) By the end of his career he would write at least 20 tales, approximately one-third of his total output, in imitation of this one source.

The teaming of resources between Boccaccio and La Fontaine, the blending of Italian meat with a spicy French sauce, was a fortunate discovery which won instantaneous recognition from sophisticated readers. Even Chapelain, the pontiff of the pension list—and a wise critic despite his failings as a poet—expressed great enthusiasm for these new tales by La Fontaine. On February 12, 1666, a week or two after the publication of Part II of the *Contes*, he wrote to their author to congratulate him for having “queened Boccaccio’s pawn.” He compliments La Fontaine on his gayety and simplicity of manner and on his “jugement à ménager les expressions ou antiques ou populaires qui sont les seules couleurs vives et naturelles de cette sorte de composition,”<sup>1</sup> a remark which shows keen understanding of the poet’s theories and techniques.

Attracted perhaps first of all by the charming archaic style of the “vieilles traductions de Boccace” (*Contes*, I, Avertissement), La Fontaine had grown familiar with the *Decameron* by the early sixteen-sixties, and presumably many years before. Like other Frenchmen of his century he seems to have had little or no knowledge of other works by Boccaccio, and he seems to have read this one only in translations. Why bother to struggle with a difficult Italian text when he frankly enjoyed the flavor of fifteenth or sixteenth-century French renderings of it? More than one translation existed but he probably employed the one by Antoine Le Maçon, dating from 1545, which was often republished in the course of the seventeenth century. Occasionally he seems to echo words and phrases from Le Maçon, for instance in his tale *L’Oraison de Saint Julien* (II, 5),<sup>2</sup> and quite often, even when transforming his source most freely, he borrows small details of description or dialogue. He not only read and reread his copy of the *Decameron*, he kept it open on his desk and constantly referred to it as he composed his tales.

The *Decameron* is usually said to have interested him less as a work of art than as a collection of libertine stories. What he relished

most, seemingly, was Boccaccio's wit and impertinence, his pages of bold immorality, his rich variety of subjects and themes, and of course his genius as a teller of tales. Unfortunately he has not left any comments on Boccaccio which would make his attitude clear. Musset may have been right when he said: "La Fontaine a ri dans Boccace/ Oû Shakespeare fondait en pleurs."<sup>3</sup> But there is at least one later tale taken from Boccaccio, *Le Faucon* (III, 5), which is very sentimental in tone and which shows that La Fontaine was capable of appreciating the seriousness and the intense emotion of his model. In most cases, of course, he disregards everything in the *Decameron* which is realistic, or passionate, or lyrical, or religious, or heroic, or tragic. But this does not prove that he had a mistaken or narrow conception of Boccaccio's greatness. One does well to remember that La Fontaine is the author of *Adonis* and a lover of elevated, tragic poetry. An extremely sensitive and versatile artist, he probably admired and set a just value on every type of story in the *Decameron*, but he borrowed only those which answered to his professional needs in the *Contes*, a very different genre.

His manner of revising Boccaccio has already received careful attention, notably from Vittorio Barri and Pietro Toldo. Another study of the subject, by N. Cacudi, goes far wide of the mark but has the virtue of offering a close textual comparison between eight of the tales and their sources in the *Decameron*. Here we need only say, very briefly, that La Fontaine suppresses almost everything that is characteristic of Boccaccio's art: not only seriousness and passion, but brutality, feudal violence, realistic local color, convincing delineation of character. In *Le Calendrier des vieillards* (II, 8), for example, he sacrifices the main theme, a study of senile infatuation, and makes the old man a comic figure; in *Richard Minutolo* (I, 2) he portrays not ardent love and jealousy but a gayly sensual adventure.<sup>4</sup> He of course eliminates the framing of the stories and along with it the debates, the digressions, the moralising, of the various narrators. Boccaccio's indignation at the hypocrisy of the clergy gives way, or will in the later tales, to a playful attitude which is intended as mildly shocking. Boccaccio's elegant, Latin-sounding prose disappears completely; not the slightest echo of it is to be heard in his successor's frothy, familiar verse.

La Fontaine looks for one thing only, the story, and then proceeds to retell it in his own lighthearted way. Usually he simplifies

the plot and quickens its pace, cutting out unnecessary incidents and secondary characters, but sometimes he does the opposite. In *L'Oraison de Saint Julien* (II, 5; *Decameron* II, 2) he follows Boccaccio's pattern step by step but repeatedly pauses to seize upon certain details and embellish them, giving the tale an entirely new atmosphere of preciousness and fantasy. Once or twice, as in *Le Berceau* (II, 3; *Decameron*, IX, 6) he stays very close to his source and even repeats some passages word for word. But in *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* (II, 14; *Decameron*, II, 7) he keeps nothing but the basic situation and invents a long chain of circumstances to fill out the tale. There seems to be no system and no year by year progression in his treatment of Boccaccio. He remained faithful to his source, or departed from it, according to his changing moods, his haste at times to meet a publication date, and of course the creative stimulus which certain stories happened to afford him.

Some scholars have expressed disappointment at La Fontaine's adaptations of the *Decameron*. Lugli, in particular, feels that these tales, with their stock characters and mechanical situations, lack humanity and a true French flavor and seem merely a libertine transposition of Boccaccio.<sup>5</sup> This criticism has much to justify it. Almost any one of the tales from Boccaccio makes delightful reading but, taken in large doses, they have an undeniable sameness and monotony. As a book Part II of the *Contes* profits greatly from the presence of certain tales based on French sources—such as *La Servante justifiée* from Marguerite de Navarre and *Le Villageois qui cherche son veau* from *Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*—which have more native warmth and freshness than many of the imitations of Boccaccio. On the other hand the two best tales of all, and on this point every critic agrees, could not have been written without the inspiration which Boccaccio provided. One of them is *L'Oraison de Saint Julien*, where La Fontaine creates a charming, dreamlike world of wishful thought and fulfilled desires. The other is that wickedly satirical extravaganza, *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe*.

He found the idea of *La Fiancée* in one of the outstanding stories of the *Decameron*, a masterpiece in its own right. Boccaccio's tale (II, 7), a sort of *Candide*, has a philosophical foundation: the vision of destruction which can be caused by a fatally beautiful and immoral woman. His Alatiel, a sultan's daughter, is shipwrecked as she is traveling to join her betrothed, and falls into the hands of a

man who craftily seduces her, giving her her first knowledge of sexual pleasures. Her overpowering beauty awakens the desire of every man who sees her, driving each one to commit some violent crime and leading to various abductions, murders, and even wars. She accepts her misfortunes, offering little resistance and giving her favors successively to eight men who capture her, until circumstances finally bring her home. Then she buries her past, fabricates a tissue of lies to deceive her father, and soon gets married as originally planned. Boccaccio's tale has comparatively little character development; his most serious concern was to show a series of men, all more or less alike, so inflamed by passion that they lose their sense of honor and bring about a tragically devastating sequence of events.

La Fontaine took great pains with his version of the story. In 1665, when transmitting one of his tales (*L'Anneau d'Hans Carvel*) to Maucroix for his approval he attached this note to the manuscript: "Joins ce conte à la nouvelle du *Gascon puni* et à la nouvelle tirée de Boccace. *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* est un breuvage de longue haleine. Il y a des traits qu'il me faut revoir" (*OD*, 587). The tale, 801 lines long, is the lengthiest one that he would ever write. And this sizable composition is almost wholly of his own invention, for he took from Boccaccio only the essential framework of the plot, filling it out with many new complications which he himself devised. He calls attention to this in his prologue:

Il n'est rien qu'on ne conte en diverses façons:  
 On abuse du vrai comme on fait de la feinte;  
 Je le souffre aux récits qui passent pour chansons;  
 Chacun y met du sien sans scrupule et sans crainte. . . .  
 J'ai suivi mon auteur en deux points seulement,  
     Points qui font véritablement  
     Le plus important de l'histoire:  
 L'un est que par huit mains Alacié passa  
     Avant que d'entrer dans la bonne;  
 L'autre que son fiancé ne s'en embarrassa,  
     Ayant peut-être en sa personne  
     De quoi négliger ce point-là.  
 Quoi qu'il en soit, la belle en ses traverses,  
     Accidents, fortunes diverses,  
 Eut beaucoup à souffrir, beaucoup à travailler,  
     Changea huit fois de chevalier.  
 Il ne faut pas pour cela qu'on l'accuse:  
 Ce n'était après tout que bonne intention,



Gratitude ou compassion,  
 Crainte de pis, honnête excuse.  
 Elle n'en plut pas moins aux yeux de son fiancé.  
 Veuve de huit galants, il la prit pour pucelle;  
 Et dans son erreur par la belle  
 Apparemment il fut laissé. (II, 14)

This prologue, where La Fontaine expresses very clearly his theory of the tale-telling art, also sets the tone for *La Fiancée* and suggests how newly, how differently from Boccaccio, he conceives and treats the story. Throwing overboard all the violence of his source, he replaces grim situations by preposterously amusing ones and unfolds a bawdy tale full of malicious innuendos directed at the fair sex.

But *La Fiancée* has more to recommend it than smutty fantasy. Going contrary to Boccaccio, La Fontaine sketches careful psychological developments which lead to, then result from Alaciel's first surrender. Engaged to marry a king whom she has never seen, she loses her heart to a gallant young man named Hispal who accompanies her on her voyage. Hispal rescues her from an attack by pirates, saves her from drowning, and brings her to safety in a foreign land where everything favors their love. But she is still virtuous and, regretfully, rejects his ardent pleas. Finally, a little like Dido, she is defeated by conspiring circumstances: the warm spring weather, a walk in the woods, the discovery of a cozy grotto, and a sudden rainstorm which makes them run for shelter. Their romance eventually begins to pall, however, and Alaciel finds herself longing for other occupations, other faces, other admirers. One day she says to her lover:

"Vous m'êtes cher, Hispal; j'aurais du déplaisir  
 Si vous ne pensiez pas que toujours je vous aime.  
 Mais qu'est-ce qu'un amour sans crainte et sans désir?  
 Je vous le demande à vous-même.  
 Ce sont des feux bientôt passés  
 Que ceux qui ne sont point dans leur cours traversés:  
 Il y faut un peu de contrainte.  
 Je crains fort qu'à la fin ce séjour si charmant  
 Ne nous soit un désert et puis un monument.  
 Hispal, ôtez-moi cette crainte."

Thus, with her first unconscious indication of duplicity, she sends Hispal home with a message for her parents, little realizing that

she is getting rid of him forever and that she will open her arms to every suitor who comes along.

The first newcomers have to use a little ingenuity to win her; she puts up some resistance or, rather, only surrenders when a good excuse seems to justify her conduct. The author's technique is to conjure up one situation after another where she has some argument, each time more ridiculous and transparent, to convince herself that she must of necessity submit to her admirer. She eventually yields simply to spite a former lover, volunteers her services to save the virtue of another girl, systematically rewards a knight errant who befriends her (an episode where La Fontaine seems to be burlesquing chivalric novels), and at the knight's death satisfies the terms of his will by turning herself over to his nephew! Then the story ends, as in Boccaccio, by her coming home and marrying her destined, unsuspecting husband. Throughout it all the poet makes oversympathetic comments and sheds alligator tears, implying that Alaciel merely does what every woman would do, given the opportunity, and in the closing lines pretends to draw a solemn moral: girls should behave themselves but, if they happen to go astray, they must keep the matter secret—perhaps they can find gullible husbands. Clearly La Fontaine's tale retains nothing of the spirit of Boccaccio. It is profoundly original, a triumph of fancy, of cynicism, of irony, and perhaps his best piece of writing before the fables.

In *La Fiancée* the poet demonstrates his fully developed mastery of storytelling, an art which he raised to an eminence unknown since the days of Chaucer. His gift as a teller of tales is marked by a subtle combination of bubbling humor and make-believe seriousness, by a continual fluctuation between objective and personal narration, by a graceful intertwining of story and commentary into a single thread. When one of Alaciel's admirers insists that he will starve himself until she yields to his passion:

. . . il forme le dessein  
De se laisser mourir de faim;  
Car de se poignarder, la chose est trop tôt faite:  
On n'a pas le temps d'en venir  
Au repentir.

—and when the princess begins to weaken at this piteous spectacle:

Le second jour commence à la toucher.  
Elle rêve à cette aventure:  
Laisser mourir un homme, et pouvoir l'empêcher,  
C'est avoir l'âme un peu trop dure.

—it would be hard to determine whether these reflections are uttered by the characters themselves or offered as joking comments by the poet. This impulsive, ever-changing narrative technique creates a double communion between subject and author, between author and reader, and gives rise to that peculiarly intimate tone of La Fontaine's best tales and fables. He transformed fiction into a fragile game, a game whose fun arises from his ingratiating personality and his scintillating literary style.

It is in such compositions as *La Fiancée*—and also in the other tales of Part II, as well as in *Joconde*—that La Fontaine perfected the stylistic quicksand upon which he would build his fables. One need only look closely at a few lines of *La Fiancée*, for example, to find the same devices which give the fables their infinite variety (and which would be exploited again by the nineteenth-century impressionists): the abrupt shifting of tone and emphasis, the mixing of expressions from different levels of diction, the telegraphic notation or heaping up of impressions, often in disregard of logical sentence structure. A serious love scene between Hispal and Alaciel suddenly takes this joking, precious turn:

Pleurs de couler, soupirs d'être poussés,  
Regards d'être au ciel adressés,  
Et puis sanglots, et puis soupirs encore.

Similarly, an attack launched against some pirates as they sleep is related in a characteristic blending of colloquial and lyrical language which leads to a swift, surprising climax:

Mainte échelle est portée, et point d'autre embarras,  
Point de tambours, force bons coutelas.  
On part sans bruit, on arrive en silence.  
L'orient venait de s'ouvrir:  
C'est un temps où le somme est dans sa violence,  
Et qui par sa fraîcheur nous contraint de dormir.  
Presque tout le peuple corsaire,  
Du sommeil à la mort n'ayant qu'un pas à faire,  
Fut assommé sans le sentir.

The style of the fables will of course differ in degree from that of the tales—it will be less discursive, less mocking, above all less distant from the sights and sounds of everyday life—but its main features will be the same and it will be developed thanks to the poet's apprenticeship as a writer of tales.

La Fontaine had to pass through the tales to arrive at his fables. He has gained a sure talent for observing the world and reporting his experience, he has searched his conscience and struggled with the problem of his own artistic purposes, he has experimented in several styles and invented the one which suits him best, he has won the attention of the public and has impressed the leading literary critics. The tales of Part II have an air of mastery and assurance which his previous works had always lacked and without which the fables might never have been born. Some few of his fables were already composed by this time, of course, and he kept on writing and revising them while at work on his tales, but it was the success of the latter which finally goaded him on to the conquest of another genre. Because of the lessons learned in the tales the evolution of the fables would be far less hesitant and laborious. From 1665 to 1668 La Fontaine wrote calmly, abundantly, confidently, as though anticipating that his next published work would be a masterpiece.

## Toward the Fables

1. *Clymène—Ideas on Poetry.*

In the conception and growth of the fables a little-known work entitled *Clymène* (OD, 18-44) may have played an important part, helping La Fontaine to fix or formulate his reflections and theories on poetic style. *Clymène* is a brief dramatic fantasy, less than 700 lines in length, in which Apollo and the Muses discuss the decline of poetry and divert themselves by celebrating, in a variety of manners and genres, the love affair between Clymène, who is a rustic beauty, and a poet named Acante, who of course represents La Fontaine himself. The significance of *Clymène* as a literary document has always remained in doubt because of uncertainty as to its date of composition. While not published until 1671, it is generally considered to have been written around 1657 or 1658, during the first years of the poet's acquaintance with Fouquet. Treated rather negligently as an "œuvre de jeunesse," this graceful reverie, which reveals so many facets of La Fontaine's art and personality, has never been studied as fully as it deserves.

The question of its date, an exceedingly complicated matter, has to be considered before the poem itself can be intelligently discussed. Early scholars (Walckenaer, Roche, Michaut, etc.) based their opinions mainly on the evidence of a single word, the plural form of "surintendant," used by Apollo in the speech which opens the play:

Apollon se plaignait aux neuf Sœurs, l'autre jour,  
De ne voir presque plus de bons vers sur l'amour.  
Le siècle, disait-il, a gâté cette affaire:  
Lui nous parler d'amour! Il ne la sait pas faire.  
Ce qu'on n'a point au cœur, l'a-t-on dans ses écrits?  
J'ai beau communiquer de l'ardeur aux esprits;  
Les belles n'ayant pas disposé la matière,  
Amour et vers, tout est fort à la cavalière.  
Adieu donc, ô beautés! je garde mon emploi  
Pour les surintendants sans plus, et pour le Roi.  
Je viens pourtant de voir, au bord de l'Hippocrène,  
Acante fort touché de certaine Clymène. . . . (OD, 18)

There were two "surintendants des finances" until the beginning of 1659, the time of Servien's death, after which Fouquet continued to exercise these functions alone; hence La Fontaine's comedy may seem to have been written before 1659. This argument has sometimes been bolstered by other suppositions: that a poet should write his *ars poetica* while still fairly young, or that La Fontaine is more likely to have carried on rural flirtations while still living regularly at Château-Thierry. These theories have no validity whatever, as a more recent scholar, Clarac, has very clearly shown (*OD*, 799-800). And, as Clarac points out, the expression "pour les surintendants" is extremely vague. La Fontaine need not necessarily have been referring to the ministers of finance—for there were other kinds, such as the "surintendant des bâtiments"—and he could have been thinking of state functionaries in general. But Clarac reaches almost the same conclusion as his predecessors, primarily because he detects in *Clymène* "la lassitude que sa domesticité put causer à la longue au poète pensionné." *Clymène* would thus have been written toward the end of La Fontaine's days at Vaux, around 1660 or 1661, but also, as Clarac adds, would probably have been retouched at the time of its publication ten years later.

The much-discussed line, "Pour les surintendants sans plus, et pour le Roi," raises other problems, however, which have never been considered. The words "pour le Roi" may hold more significance than "pour les surintendants." La Fontaine began addressing pieces of complimentary verse to the King around 1660, on the occasion of the royal engagement and marriage, but indirectly, through the medium of the "pension poétique" for Fouquet. In later years, after the disgrace of Fouquet, he would continue flattering the King, more directly and on a larger scale; the fables of 1668 are dedicated to the King's son. The line in question may refer to verse written to please the King, and the "surintendants" may be just a memory. It should be noted, finally, that La Fontaine may not be alluding to himself at all! The speaker is not Acante, who quite clearly stands for La Fontaine, but rather Apollo, the god of poetry, who doubtless echoes the author's own ideas but probably without any personal or autobiographical parallelism. The context is important, too. Apollo complains that love and poetry, *i.e.* passionately inspired poetry, are both almost extinct, and seems to resign himself to fostering official verse in praise of the King and his ministers.

Then he espies Acante, an exception to the general rule, a poet who is really in love, a poet to whom Cupid says, some pages later (*OD*, 41): "Vos vers ont fait valoir mon nom et ma puissance;/Vous ne chantez que moi . . . ." All this makes it quite doubtful that La Fontaine has himself in mind when he speaks of writing verse "pour les surintendants." Rather he seems to be thinking of himself in a new role, as the author of vibrant love poetry. (The reason for this could be the series of four elegies, also addressed to Clymène, whether the same or a different woman). In any event, the mention of the "surintendants" clearly cannot be relied upon for dating the composition of the comedy.

Other allusions are equally mysterious. Who is this hard-won country maiden, Clymène, and when did she stir the poet's heart? She bears some resemblance to the Clymène of the elegies, and also to a Caliste mentioned in one of them, who "Répondait d'amitié quand je parlais d'amour" (*OD*, 601), but did the poet tell these tales with some degree of exactitude, or was he boasting of imaginary conquests? Did he write *Clymène* when fired by passion, as he seems to claim, or was he warming over some adventure of his youth? The references to the poet himself are somewhat more transparent. When Apollo advises Erato not to marry an author—"Rarement un auteur demeure à la maison"—he seems to be joking at La Fontaine's own errant nature. The complaint that funeral orations always put the audience to sleep (*OD*, 39) suggests the slightly impertinent attitude of La Fontaine in his *Voyage en Limousin*. The Muses know his absence of mind and they are not surprised when he fails to hear them calling him:

D'aujourd'hui pensez-vous qu'il réponde?  
Quand une rêverie agréable et profonde  
Occupe son esprit, on a beau lui parler. (*OD*, 40)

Even more personal and intimate is the description of Acante uttered by Thalia:

Sire, Acante est un homme inégal à tel point  
Que d'un moment à l'autre on ne le connaît point:  
Inégal en amour, en plaisir, en affaire;  
Tantôt gai, tantôt triste; un jour il désespère,  
Un autre jour il croit que la chose ira bien:  
Pour vous en parler franc, nous n'y connaissons rien. (*OD*, 30)

These comments have a mellow expansiveness, the confiding charm of the tales and fables, quite different from the poet's uncertainty and eagerness while still a hanger-on in the world of Fouquet. The author seems sure of himself, as though he had made his mark and were trying to exploit his character and make himself a legendary figure. One begins to suspect that *Clymène* was not written during the Vaux period, and that it may be a product of La Fontaine's more successful years between 1665 and 1670.

One reason why *Clymène* has traditionally been relegated to the period of Fouquet's sway over La Fontaine is that it has certain themes in common with *Le Songe de Vaux*. There is an undeniable relationship between the two works, but this relationship has never been investigated or properly assessed. The seventh fragment of *Le Songe de Vaux*, in which Acante watches Aminte as she sleeps (OD, 106-111), presents a situation which is repeated, in *Clymène*, first of all in a comic scene acted out by Melpomene and Thalia and then again, in greater detail, in the narrative by Acante which brings the play to an end (OD, 25-29, 41-44). Acante's ardent recital of his overtures to Clymène comes particularly close to the episode in *Le Songe de Vaux*. The circumstances differ, naturally—one incident takes place in Fouquet's park at Vaux, the other in a cottage near Parnassus—but in both texts the lover comes upon his mistress asleep, admires the beauty of her half-covered (or uncovered) bosom, and debates which part of her body to kiss. In *Le Songe de Vaux* his courage fails him but in *Clymène*, with the permission of Cupid, he steals the kiss; then, in both cases, his mistress awakens, chides him, and finally gives him her pardon and some bit of encouragement in his love for her. Clearly, the two episodes are different versions of a single subject: a rather laborious version in *Le Songe de Vaux*, cluttered with compliments for Sylvie (Mme Fouquet), then a very charming one in *Clymène*, quick-moving, fresh, and witty. One must recall that La Fontaine never published this and several other fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux* and that he systematically exploited this unpublished material in his later compositions, e.g. in a fable and in certain features of *Psyché*. With these facts in mind one cannot escape concluding that *Clymène*, if partially inspired by persons or events at Vaux, was surely reconceived and recomposed after Fouquet's downfall in 1661, indeed probably after his final condemnation by the courts in 1664. Another



work impregnated with love, *Psyché*, still unfinished in 1668 then published in 1669, and *Clymène*, published in 1671, seem to have had a similar history and seem to have been written around the same time.<sup>1</sup>

There are other resemblances which suggest that *Psyché* and *Clymène* ripened more or less simultaneously in the author's mind. The two works have certain characters in common (Cupid, Acante) and are constructed around divinities and themes from ancient mythology. Both show the author's preoccupation with artistic problems; the discussion of poetic styles in *Clymène* is not far removed from the debate on comedy and tragedy in *Psyché*. *Clymène*, like *Psyché*, is so beautiful a mortal that she makes Venus jealous:

Vénus depuis longtemps est de mauvaise humeur;  
Clymène lui fait ombre; et Vénus, ayant peur  
D'être mise au-dessous d'une beauté mortelle,  
Disait hier à son fils: "Mais la croit-on si belle?" (OD, 20)

The closest textual similarity is to be found between a passage describing *Clymène*'s beautiful feet:

Figurez-vous le pied de la mère d'Amour,  
Lorsqu'allant des Tritons attirer les œillades,  
Il dispute du prix avec ceux des Naïades,

—and some lines in *Psyché* where the creatures of the sea pay their respects to Venus, a passage which begins, "Cent Tritons, la suivant jusqu'au port de Cythère," and ends with the surf touching the goddess's foot, "S'en vient baiser les pieds de la mère d'Amour" (OD, 42, 134). Such details prove little in themselves but, taken together with other evidence, they suggest that the same mood, the same intellectual activities, the same dream of love, guided La Fontaine as he wrote both *Clymène* and *Psyché*.

Anyone who has followed the evolution of the poet's first tales, and then reads *Clymène*, will surely feel that the comedy could not have been composed before the tales of 1666. It may not mean very much, chronologically, that an incident from *Le Songe de Vaux*, the lover who is tempted to kiss his sleeping mistress, inspires a few lines in *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* (composed in 1665):

. . . de prendre un baiser il forma le dessein:  
Tout prêt à faire choix de la bouche ou du sein. . . (Contes, II, 14)

—and that the situation, even the wording occurs again in *Clymène*: “C’est à vous de baiser ou la bouche, ou le sein” (*OD*, 41). What matters more is that the tales of 1666 and later, and also *Clymène*, display the same banter, the same narrative tricks, the same sly sensualism. The jesting about the Muses and their virginity, the prolonged guessing game to determine which part of *Clymène*’s body is most kissable—this erotic byplay did not become characteristic of La Fontaine until the time of *Joconde* and Part II of the *Contes*. The author himself recognized this kinship between the tales and *Clymène*. He published the comedy in the same volume with Part III of his tales and justified this procedure with a note pointing out the somewhat tale-like nature of Acante’s narrative, “un récit, non tout à fait tel que ceux de mes contes, et aussi qui ne s’en éloigne pas tout à fait” (*OD*, 799).

Another and very convincing indication of *Clymène*’s date is to be seen in the kind of literary interests and theories which it records. Far from suggesting the period of Fouquet’s supremacy, they are all aligned with opinions which La Fontaine expressed in the period from 1665 to 1670—in prefaces to the tales and fables, in *Psyché*, etc. Briefly stated, the principal subject of *Clymène* is an experimental trial of various styles. The author is not merely showing his virtuosity but is feeling his way, testing the appropriateness of certain styles for certain genres and materials, just as he had done in the first edition of his tales, just as he does in some of his fables (II,1 and VI,1). He is concerned with the problems of naturalness and of imitation, he keeps meditating on such models as Horace, Voiture, and Marot, exactly as in the preface to the collection of tales which appeared in 1666. Finally, La Fontaine’s discussion of the disappearance of “heroic” genres, such as the epic and the Malherbean ode, could scarcely have been written during his years at Vaux, when these genres were in fashion and when he repeatedly tried his hand at them. The change in literary tastes was one of the reasons why he never attempted to complete *Le Songe de Vaux*, as he explained in 1671 when offering a few fragments of it to the public: “la poésie lyrique ni l’héroïque, qui doivent y régner, ne sont plus en vogue comme elles étaient alors” (*OD*, 76). This same devaluation of poetry is bemoaned throughout *Clymène*.

All these facts tend to show that, if the first seed of *Clymène* began to germinate in Fouquet’s gardens in the period from 1657 to

1661, the poem came to life and took on its definitive form a decade later. *Clymène* should be ranked among the important works—tales, fables, *Psyché*—which La Fontaine produced in the rich years between 1665 and 1670. It was composed just before or just after the fables of 1668, or concurrently with them, and thus provides an illuminating commentary on the poet's art at the very moment of his first and most sparkling masterpieces.

*Clymène* does not belong to any genre. If La Fontaine compared part of it to a "conte" he also gave it the subtitle "comédie" and noted that it was a special sort of comedy, not divided into scenes and not meant to be staged (*OD*, 799). An idyllic dialogue between Apollo and the Muses, it owes something to Theocritus and Virgil, yet it becomes at times an *ars poetica*, at times a love poem. This departure from standard models was required by the nature of the subject. Apollo is depressed and bored by the banality of contemporary poetry and he asks the Muses to cheer him up by singing something truly new and original: "Il me faut du nouveau, n'en fût-il point au monde" (*OD*, 19). He proposes that they take turns singing the beauty of *Clymène*, each Muse choosing a different literary form. There are seven of these performances by the Muses and an eighth by Acante, knit together by comments and reflections made mainly by Apollo. First a brief but formal amoebaeon eclogue, with responses alternated by Terpsichore and Euterpe. Then Melpomene and Thalia take the parts of *Clymène* and Acante in two dramatic scenes, one serious and one comic, which develop at length the attitudes of the two lovers in respect to "amitié" and "amour." Clio celebrates *Clymène* in a *ballade* reminiscent of Marot, and Calliope attempts to honor her in an ode like those of Malherbe but after a single stanza confesses defeat in this difficult, outmoded form. Next Polymnia, with far more success, sings a graceful Horatian ode, or at least an ode of Horatian (and Ronsardian) theme, urging *Clymène* to pluck the pleasures of her youth. Erato, finally, after joking about her own prospects for marriage, obliges with a humorous *dizain* in the manner of Voiture. But by this time Apollo is beginning to feel bored again. Instead of having Urania recite, he and his troupe seek out Acante and listen to the poet relate how Cupid helped him to surprise and kiss *Clymène*. With a note of envy for the happiness and enthusiasm of Acante, Apollo bids him farewell, and the play comes to an end.

The eight recitals in honor of *Clymène* are somewhat disjointed, disparate, and uneven, perhaps necessarily so. The stanza in imitation of Malherbe was intended to sound strained and artificial, so that it could be shouted down as a failure. But some of the other pieces, such as the *ballade* and the *dizain*, which Apollo and the Muses accept without complaint, have little to recommend them except their cleverness and ingenuity; they could have been composed by almost any writer of light verse and are not particularly characteristic of La Fontaine. He does much better in the eclogue and the Horatian ode, employing ancient themes with real feeling yet with subtle overtures of humor. But his best talents emerge in the two dramatic scenes—different in mood but both of them alive with quick-moving, graceful give and take between the two actors—and also in the precious, fervent monologue spoken by Acante.

Critics have shown wide disagreement in their appraisals of *Clymène*. Voltaire denounced it as an insipid trifle. Banville treated it with unrestrained enthusiasm: "Recommencer neuf fois le même récit! Est-il possible d'imaginer un problème littéraire plus audacieux, plus effroyable à résoudre? Et quel autre que La Fontaine eût osé le rêver?"<sup>2</sup> A sympathetic biographer of La Fontaine, Lafenestre, has admired the Shakespearian qualities of *Clymène*, calling it the best dramatic fantasy before Musset and noting that it could scarcely have been appreciated by the poet's classical public; it was a "tentative non comprise et qui ne fut pas suivie."<sup>3</sup> More recently, Clarac has pointed out some exquisite passages in *Clymène* yet has spoken of its "aisance un peu languissante."<sup>4</sup> All these comments have some degree of aptness. *Clymène* drags in places and does not always overcome the triviality and artificiality of a literary game. But generally speaking it possesses a springlike warmth and freshness, a radiant yet amused sentimentality, which bring it close to *Adonis*, to *Psyché*, and to some of La Fontaine's best fables.

Among the most vivid pages of *Clymène*, and the most significant for a literary historian, are the transitions from scene to scene which set forth the poet's aspirations as an artist. Witty, unpedantic, with no pretention of completeness, these remarks by Apollo and the Muses nevertheless provide La Fontaine's nearest and most serious approach to a poetics. While never a systematic theorizer he held some deep convictions concerning his craft which appear

for the first time in *Clymène* and which will be reaffirmed in many of his later works.

Sincere devotion to art is the keynote of *Clymène*. When Apollo sighs that inspired poetry has declined he has two ideas in mind: the need for inspiration and high ideals of poetic craftsmanship, and also the superiority of ancient poetry over that of the current age in France. The Muses frankly doubt that they can speak with the voice which they once gave to Horace:

Mais avons-nous l'esprit qu'autrefois à cet homme  
Nous savions inspirer sur le déclin de Rome?  
Tout est trop fort déchu dans le sacré vallon. (*OD*, 34)

Apollo thinks this decadence of the arts will inevitably grow worse and even predicts a day when poetry and myth will die:

Nous vieillissons enfin, tout autant que nous sommes  
De dieux nés de la fable, et forgés par les hommes.  
Je prévois par mon art un temps où l'univers  
Ne se souciera plus ni d'auteurs, ni de vers,  
Où vos divinités périront, et la mienne.  
Jouons de notre reste avant que ce temps vienne. (*OD*, 34)

Real poetry is not being written because it is no longer esteemed; the public lacks taste and seizes upon the worst kind of versifying for its amusement:

Chacun forge des vers; mais pour la poésie,  
Cette princesse est morte, aucun ne s'en soucie.  
Avec un peu de rime, on va vous fabriquer  
Cent versificateurs en un jour, sans manquer.  
Ce langage divin, ces charmantes figures,  
Qui touchaient autrefois les âmes les plus dures,  
Et par qui les rochers et les bois attirés  
Tressaillaient à des traits de l'Olympe admirés;  
Cela, dis-je, n'est plus maintenant en usage.  
On vous méprise, et nous, et ce divin langage.  
"Qu'est-ce, dit-on?—Des vers." Suffit; le peuple y court. (*OD*, 39)

This indictment of public tastes is a perennial theme with La Fontaine. Despite his own gifts as a writer of amusing verse he would always yearn for the good old days, the days of elevated poetry, of the idyl and the epic, of *Adonis*. In the preface to his fables of 1668 he notes that even the most serious subjects must be treated with a new, light touch: "C'est ce qu'on demande au-

jourd'hui: on veut de la nouveauté et de la gaieté." Similarly, in his preface to *Psyché*: "le goût du siècle. . . se porte au galant et à la plaisanterie." Not that he opposed the wishes of his readers. He repeatedly said that his first rule was to please and he made extraordinary efforts to sound out and satisfy the demands of the reading public. His problem, then, was to reconcile expediency with art, to compose works which would amuse an audience intent on cleverness and novelty and which would also satisfy his own high literary ideals. He grapples with this problem again and again in various discussions of his art, and the solution is always the same. Whether it be the studied negligence of his tales, or "un certain charme" which he seeks to give his fables, or the painfully achieved mixing of styles in a "caractère nouveau" for *Psyché*, it is always a question of serious, thoughtful work, gracefully hidden or disguised. As Erato insists in *Clymène* (OD, 38), every good poem, even a gay stanza like those of *Voiture*, exacts its toll in human labor. La Fontaine had already expressed this idea once in a complaint to Fouquet (OD, 501) and, always accused of being facile, would return to it on many occasions (e.g. OD, 63, 657). Not only inspiration or genius, but time and hard work—decisions to make, esthetic difficulties to overcome—these are necessarily involved in the creation of any work of art.

The superiority of past over present implied a doctrine of imitation, to which La Fontaine and every literary theorist of his age wholeheartedly adhered. But this imitation must never be mere copywork. As he explains in *Clymène* only a translator can be allowed to follow a foreign or ancient model at all closely; an author who does this is worse than mediocre (OD, 32): "C'est un bétail servile et sot, à mon avis,/Que les imitateurs; on dirait des brebis . . . ." Thus, as Apollo points out, a specific ode by Malherbe cannot be successfully imitated. But it is possible to exploit the kind of theme, the kind of tone, the technical devices, which Malherbe employed and which are appropriate for this genre. In *Clymène* La Fontaine is dealing primarily with stylistic imitation, rather than imitation of subject matter, but this latter question is also mentioned, if rather briefly. When Erato complains that the topic assigned to her has already been treated by the other Muses, Apollo replies that no topic is ever exhausted (OD, 38): "Cela ne vous fait rien, la chose est infinie;/ Toujours notre cabale y trouve à

regretter." In similar terms La Fontaine would justify his reworking of Greek apologues (*Fables*, III,1): "Mais ce champ ne se peut tellement moissonner/ Que les derniers venus n'y trouvent à glaner." The very nature of *Clymène*, the repeated variations of a single theme, can be called a demonstration of the theory of imitation. Any subject, no matter how well known, no matter how often repeated and reinterpreted across the ages, can still be treated originally and become a new creation in the hands of a gifted artist.

This guiding principle of French classical literature, although well understood today, still needs to be emphasized because of the fact that writers were constantly obliged to defend their literary practices. Their audience was hard to please and stood ready to criticize any author who seemed too uninventive or any author who went to the opposite extreme and seemed too original or too independent of long-accepted models. La Fontaine found it necessary to vindicate himself on both counts. In the preface to his tales of 1666, in the preface to his fables of 1668, and on many other occasions, he indicated his sources and discussed his treatment of them, insisting on his rights both to exploit any literary model and also to revise and reconceive the subject with complete freedom. Perhaps his clearest expression of this conviction occurs in the *Epître à Huet*, where he denounces copyists yet justifies his cavalier borrowings from Latin literature:

Souvent à marcher seul j'ose me hasarder.  
On me verra toujours pratiquer cet usage;  
Mon imitation n'est point un esclavage:  
Je ne prends que l'idée, et les tours, et les lois,  
Que nos maîtres suivaient eux-mêmes autrefois.  
Si d'ailleurs quelque endroit plein chez eux d'excellence  
Peut entrer dans mes vers sans nulle violence,  
Je l'y transporte, et veux qu'il n'ait rien d'affecté,  
Tâchant de rendre mien cet air d'antiquité. (OD, 646)

Throughout his career La Fontaine clung tenaciously to his personal independence, his right to express *himself*, and refused to be classified as anyone's follower or disciple.

In the *Epître à Huet*, as in *Clymène*, he is concerned above all with style. Since it was the essence of classicism to seek originality in manner rather than in matter, his esthetic preoccupations always reduced themselves to the search for a style—a style appropriate to

the subject, to the genre, and to himself as a poet. While remaining true to himself, while never imitating slavishly, he of course sought inspiration in other authors and chose from them whatever answered his needs. Not all his masters received their due in *Clymène*—the occasion did not lend itself to discussions of Homer and Boccaccio, for example—but certain favorite lyric poets figured prominently in his meditations on style. For light, trifling verse the best models, according to Apollo, were “le tour” of Marot—his familiar tone but not his archaic vocabulary—and the “plume élégante,” the “goût exquis et fin,” of Vincent Voiture (*OD*, 31, 33). For serious poems, odes in particular, Malherbe was the acknowledged master whom poets must imitate. But the sustained eloquence and austerity of Malherbe could scarcely be equaled or successfully revived; one might do better to study the style of a more flexible, more human poet, Horace best of all:

C'est pourquoi choisissez des tons un peu moins hauts.  
 Horace en a de tous; voyez ceux qui vous duisent.  
 J'aime fort les auteurs qui sur lui se conduisent:  
 Voilà les gens qu'il faut à présent imiter. (*OD*, 34)

Horace, a “poet of every tone,” satirist, indulgent moralist, ironic commentator on human follies, was probably La Fontaine’s most cherished companion in the years when the first six books of fables were being composed. The presence of Horace—and to a lesser extent that of Malherbe, Marot, and Voiture—can be sensed everywhere in the fables’ wide-ranging and infinitely varied poetic style. It was characteristic of La Fontaine—as *Clymène* shows so clearly—that while he evolved and conceived his first masterpieces, he came to grips with the problem of style, weighed his own talents, experimented with several different manners, and deliberately sought out the mentors from whom he could learn the most.

## 2. *The manuscript fables—Phaedrus.*

The fable—or apologue, or moralizing anecdote—is a genre which goes back to primitive times and which will presumably never perish. It has an eternal human appeal and provides teachers, preachers, and parents with a most effective tool. It seems un-



necessary to repeat here what so many scholars have already said concerning the history and transmission of the fable before La Fontaine, all the more so since the poet himself paid no attention to such matters. Suffice it to say that he undoubtedly came in contact with many time-honored fables, first at home, then in school, and finally in a variety of books both old and new. What concerns us here is to see, if possible, how he came to take a professional interest in this ever-popular genre, how he arrived at his stroke of genius. His originality was to seize upon a simple folk-form—which had rarely been exploited by first-rate writers—to sense its artistic possibilities, to recognize his own affinity for the genre, and to compose fables which are beautiful poems.

He could not have failed to notice that fables were being revived, around the middle of the seventeenth century, and were being well received by the reading public. If he read Tristan l'Hermite's novel, *Le Page disgracié* (1643), he would have seen several episodes evolved from ancient apologues. The Indian fables of "Pilpay" were translated into French in 1644 as *Le Livre des lumières ou la Conduite des rois*, a book which eventually became one of La Fontaine's favorite sources of material. At least three compilations of fables belonging to the Aesop tradition—by Boissat, Audin, and Nevelet—appeared from 1610 to 1644, all three being republished in the years 1659–60. Nevelet's *Mythologia aesopica*, a collection of Greek and Latin fables ranging from Aesop to Abstemius, the Greek ones all accompanied by translations into Latin, was a rich storehouse of fable literature which may have proved very useful to La Fontaine. Almost 700 pages long, but small in format and easy to carry around, it offered some 790 fables or versions of fables. Most literary historians agree, although no one has undertaken the enormous task of proving it, that La Fontaine went to Nevelet as his main sourcebook in preparing the fables of 1668. Fables were also beginning to acquire an aura of erudition, and in circles close to La Fontaine. He probably knew Ménage, one of various scholars who composed fables in Latin verse. He certainly knew Patru, whose *Lettres à Olinde* (1659) included several fables in French prose, heavily laden with moralizing commentaries. This growing taste for instructive literature was in tune with the times; fables satisfied the same need as did the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, the sermons of Bourdaloue and Bossuet, or some years later the *Ca-*

*ractères* of La Bruyère. Recognizing the tastes of his age, searching for an unappropriated genre which he could make his specialty, and aspiring for success in a medium more respectable than the tale in verse, La Fontaine quite naturally was led to experiment with fables. But not fables in Latin, nor prosy ones, nor solemn moral discourses, for he saw that his opportunity was to please rather than to instruct, or to instruct pleasantly while appealing to the light, precious, ironic, artistically sensitive tendencies of the "honnêtes gens" of his day. The trend was toward fables in prose. His respected friend Patru is thought to have given him some famous and very bad advice, saying of fables that "leur principal ornement est de n'en avoir aucun" (*Fables*, Préface). Despite these pressures La Fontaine knew instinctively that the medium which suited *him* was verse. He had precedents he could cite, both in antiquity and in sixteenth-century France, but he had to go against the tide. In his own century no poet had written fables in French verse; none had appeared in the countless "recueils collectifs".<sup>1</sup> He had to create the genre anew, finding the right formula, the right tone, both to express his own gifts and to win acceptance from a hypercritical audience.

He had already, perhaps unconsciously, come very close to writing fables. According to legend, *Le Meunier, son fils, et l'âne* (III,1), or an early form of the poem, goes back to 1647. The piece differs in character from most of his fables of 1668 and may well have originated in the days of the "Table ronde," perhaps as a satire or epistle addressed to Maucroix. The stories of fishes and birds in *Le Songe de Vaux* and one of the verse pieces in the *Voyage en Limousin*, although they are freely invented and lack the traditional Aesopic pattern, suggest that the poet had Aesop in the back of his mind. Indeed, it was probably before his departure for Limousin in 1663 that he made his first deliberate experiments in fable form. His suppressed fable, *Le Renard et l'écureuil*, which voiced his hopes for the liberation of Fouquet, could scarcely have been written any later. It is well known that this fable, grouped with nine others which doubtless date from the same period, has been preserved in the manuscripts of Conrart.<sup>2</sup> There is every reason to believe that, by 1663, La Fontaine had composed a fair number of fables and had begun sending batches of them to his friends—Conrart, Patru, Maucroix—to be appraised.

This hypothesis is supported by the existence of another group of 15 fables in a manuscript at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève.<sup>3</sup> The two manuscripts duplicate one another to some extent—they have six fables in common—but there are many variants which reveal La Fontaine's careful revision of his work and suggest strongly that the Sainte-Geneviève copies were made somewhat later than those in the Conrart collection, perhaps around 1664. There are, notably, three distinct versions of *Le Loup et l'agneau*, two in the manuscripts and a third in the edition of 1668. The manuscript poems represent La Fontaine's earliest manner as a fabulist. They deserve to be studied carefully and it may be useful to list them in detail, giving at the same time some information concerning their principal literary sources:

	Fable	Manuscript	Main source
	Le Renard et l'écureuil	C	
	La Poule et le renard	SG	
I,2	Le Corbeau et le renard	C SG	Phaedrus
I,3	La Grenouille . . . le bœuf	C SG	Phaedrus and Horace
I,4	Les deux mulets	C	Phaedrus
I,6	La génisse, la chèvre et la brebis . . .	C SG	Phaedrus
I,9	Le Rat de ville et le rat des champs	C	Horace
I,10	Le Loup et l'agneau	C SG	Phaedrus
I,15	La Mort et le malheureux	C SG	Seneca
II,2	Conseil tenu par les rats	SG	Abstemius
II,3	Le Loup plaidant contre le renard . . .	SG	Phaedrus
II,17	Le Paon se plaignant à Junon	SG	Phaedrus
III,4	Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi	C	Phaedrus
III,14	Le Lion devenu vieux	C SG	Phaedrus
IV,9	Le Geai paré des plumes du paon	SG	Phaedrus and Horace
IV,13	Le Cheval s'étant voulu venger . . .	SG	Phaedrus and Horace
IV,18	Le Vieillard et ses enfants	SG	Aesop and "du mien"
V,13	La Poule aux œufs d'or	SG	Aesop, Babrios, Avianus
VI,8	Le Vieillard et l'âne	SG	Phaedrus

The first item in the list above is the fable in honor of Fouquet. The second, *La Poule et le renard*, was never published by La Fontaine and has found few editors willing to attribute it to him. If he did, indeed, compose it—when still very unsure of his aims as a fabulist—he had excellent reasons for not printing it with his fables. It tells at some length the story of a hen who finds her mate unfaithful. She tries to deliver the cock and his concubines to a fox but fails in her plot and is herself killed by the angry fox. Moral: don't use an enemy's services to avenge an offense. The piece is not artistically

successful, it is slightly indecent, and it falls somewhere between two different genres, the fable and the tale.

The list of manuscript pieces has implications of interest to anyone who wishes to study the order of composition of La Fontaine's fables. Although all six books of the edition of 1668 are represented here, seven of the early fables listed found their ultimate place in Book I, and all but two of them in Books I through IV. Thus there seems to be a fairly consistent relationship—with various exceptions, to be sure—between the time when a fable was written and the place it occupies in the printed book. It would probably be safe to say that most of the fables in Books V and VI were produced at least two or three years later than most of those in Books I and II. La Fontaine seems to have filled one book, then gone on to fill the next, but without adhering to a strict rule and often switching fables from one place to another for artistic reasons. The analysis of his sources will show this same general trend, but again with enough exceptions to make any detailed conclusion quite hazardous.

The manuscript fables may of course represent only a fraction of the poet's fables composed by 1663 or 1664. But presumably they offer a fair sampling of his output; one can assume that other fables of those years would be more or less similar in inspiration and in technique. An important and little realized fact now becomes quite obvious: he began writing fables as an imitator of Phaedrus and Horace; he did not go back to their source, the earlier and less sophisticated prose apologues attributed to Aesop. He borrowed from Aesop too, and also from Seneca and Abstemius and others, but only in very small measure, perhaps in a spirit of experimentation. It was, after all, quite natural that La Fontaine, always a lover of Latin poetry, should turn there for his first models when he embarked on this new literary venture. Horace was his first choice, no doubt, but offered very little fable material to work with. Phaedrus, if far less brilliant, possessed some merit and could furnish him with a broad repertory of subjects. One suspects, recalling La Fontaine's preoccupation with Horace in *Clymène*, that he aspired to transform Phaedrus into French poetry which would possess all the richness and charm of Horace.

He pillaged Phaedrus more completely and more systematically than any other poet who ever brought him inspiration. Among the

ninety odd then surviving fables by Phaedrus, he appropriated at least 50 for more or less deliberate imitation. An exact figure cannot be stated, since La Fontaine sometimes intermingles a multitude of sources. But Phaedrus can be held accountable as the primary (and sometimes unique) literary contributor to at least ten fables in Book I of the edition of 1668, seven in Book II, eight in Book III, and five in Book IV. From that point on he is present less frequently, or is followed less faithfully, or is blurred in the shadow cast by Aesop and other fabulists. As a guide and formative influence upon La Fontaine, at the time when he was conceiving his first fables, the importance of Phaedrus cannot be overstressed.

The fables of Phaedrus, reduced to prose, had been widely read and imitated during the Middle Ages but the original compositions in verse were not discovered, and then in a very fragmentary manuscript, until the last years of the sixteenth century. He soon became widely accepted in Europe, especially as a school text. His simple style, his uncomplicated iambics, his wholesome moral lessons, provided an excellent first-year reader for young students of Latin. La Fontaine could have read Phaedrus in Nevelet's collection or in any number of scholarly editions; he chose instead a school-boy edition, *Les Fables de Phèdre*, prepared by Le Maître de Sacy. This work appeared in the sixteen forties and was republished many times during the next hundred years. By 1668 it had reached its eighth edition. Just as he had done for Terence, the Jansenist solitary expurgated Phaedrus, deleting or revising obscene passages, and wrote a French prose translation to accompany the text. He sometimes changed the traditional titles of the fables; *Socrates ad amicos* became *Socratis dictum*, or in French translation *Parole de Socrate*, which is the title adopted by La Fontaine (IV, 17). Another title used by La Fontaine *L'œil du maître* (IV, 21) comes from the French and Latin maxims which Le Maître de Sacy introduced at the head of each fable to reinforce the moral lessons of Phaedrus. It has never been known why, in one of his later fables (VIII, 15), La Fontaine, while seeming to use the old story of the ass and the stag, changed the cast of characters to a rat and an elephant. The reason is that the fable by Phaedrus is indelicate (the ass displays his genitalia) and that Lemaistre de Sacy therefore rewrote the fable, telling of an impudent rat who thinks himself the elephant's

equal because they have similar tails. Fortunately, there are only a few indecent passages in the fables of Phaedrus; La Fontaine was not led far astray from his source.

He held a high opinion of Phaedrus and, possibly as an acknowledgment of his indebtedness, paid him this warm tribute in the preface of 1668:

On ne trouvera pas ici l'élégance ni l'extrême brèveté qui rendent Phèdre recommandable: ce sont qualités au-dessus de ma portée. Comme il m'était impossible de l'imiter en cela, j'ai cru qu'il fallait en récompense égayer l'ouvrage plus qu'il n'a fait. Non que je le blâme d'en être demeuré dans ces termes: la langue latine n'en demandait pas davantage, et si l'on y veut prendre garde, on reconnaîtra dans cet auteur le vrai caractère et le vrai génie de Térence. La simplicité est magnifique chez ces grands hommes . . .

This comment seems ingenuous and overenthusiastic, particularly since La Fontaine mentions only simplicity, concision, and elegance as the merits of the Roman fabulist. In truth it is hard to find many others; Phaedrus seldom rises above poetic mediocrity, in spite of his pithy observations on law courts and politics, in spite of his brisk satire of manners and of the failings of mankind. But he has two qualities which must have impressed La Fontaine. He improved vastly on his Aesopic sources, humanizing them, turning the animals into types of men and women. Even though they are types, seldom characterized and described, merely puppets to demonstrate a lesson, they doubtless provided the first inspiration for La Fontaine's magnificently ambiguous animals, creatures who lead a double life, always visible to the reader as both beasts and human beings. Secondly, the "freedman of Augustus," proud but sensitive, and bitterly conscious of his inferior social position, felt he was being persecuted and frequently injected vengeful, cynical comments in his prologues and fables. This side of his character did not appeal to La Fontaine:

Si j'ajoute du mien à son invention,  
C'est pour peindre nos mœurs et non point par envie.  
Je suis trop au-dessous de cette ambition.  
Phèdre enchérit souvent par un motif de gloire . . . (IV, 18)

The French poet had no pathetic complaints to make but he learned

from Phaedrus that the fable could become a tribune to express his own personality.

The literary theories of Phaedrus must also have interested La Fontaine. In his various prologues and epilogues Phaedrus repeatedly discussed his intentions as a fabulist. He followed Aesop in keeping his fables as brief as possible, yet, while insisting on brevity he did not make a fetish of it, and on a few occasions deliberately wrote fables running to 30 or 40 lines in length. He often called attention to his superiority over Aesop. It was not enough, he said, to offer useful little lessons. While fables must be brief and instructive they must also tell a story, agreeably and artistically. He claimed complete freedom in revising his sources, adding touches of humor, introducing bits of realistic detail, and often putting the fables, or sections of them, in dialogue form. These ideas, and the execution of them in the fables of Phaedrus, are all reflected in the earliest fables by La Fontaine. His own conception of the genre, around 1663, scarcely went beyond that of his Roman predecessor. Even the physical arrangement of the Latin fables, the hundred or so pieces divided into five books, sometimes with a prologue or epilogue, surely played some part in La Fontaine's planning for the volume of 1668.

His greatest debt to Phaedrus is of course the material of the fables themselves. In the manuscript poems he follows his model very faithfully, usually keeping the moral and the main facts of the story, profiting by whatever descriptive features or stylistic devices he could find, and struggling to keep his work as concise as possible. Seldom do his imitations of Phaedrus run over 20 or 30 lines in length. With a sure touch he seized upon the most sparkling passages in Phaedrus and made them his own: the description of the mule with his tinkling bell (I, 4; Phaedrus, II, 7), the sugary compliments which the fox pays to the crow (I, 2; Phaedrus, I, 13), the nervousness of the frogs, which he heightens considerably, in *Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi* (III, 4; Phaedrus, I, 2), the lamb's pleas to the wolf in one of Phaedrus's best fables (I, 1), which became one of his own best, *Le Loup et l'agneau* (I, 10). His close attention to the Latin text can be seen in countless places, as in this instance where the lion explains his right to cheat his three partners of their prey:

Ego primam [partem] tollo, nominor quia Leo;  
Secundam, quia sum fortis, tribuetis mihi:

Tum quia plus valeo, me sequetur tertia;  
Malo adficietur, si quis quartam tetigerit. (I,5)

Elle [la première part] doit être à moi, dit-il, et la raison,  
C'est que je m'appelle Lion:  
A cela l'on n'a rien à dire.  
La seconde par droit me doit échoir encor:  
Ce droit, vous le savez, c'est le droit du plus fort.  
Comme le plus vaillant je prétends la troisième.  
Si quelqu'une de vous touche à la quatrième,  
Je l'étranglerai tout d'abord. (I,6)

Yet what a difference between the two passages, the one a clever but colorless enumeration of the lion's rights, the other the complacent, menacing speech of a successful swindler.

The intellectual content of La Fontaine's early fables must be treated with extreme caution since it often comes from Phaedrus with little or no revision. When the French poet complains of fastidious, fault-finding critics (II, 1), one cannot make any inference concerning the reactions of his readers; he is simply repeating the pattern of a fable by Phaedrus (IV, 7), perhaps without subscribing to the ideas himself. The bluntness of certain moral lessons, such as "Notre ennemi, c'est notre maître" (VI, 8), merely reflects the cynicism of the Roman freedman. La Fontaine would always sympathize with the miseries of the poor and perhaps he felt that any master, or any government, did little to help the lower classes, but he was not inclined to make vehement protests; he would soon learn to express such thoughts more gently, by tone and implication rather than by overt statement.

Yet even in these early fables he generally lightens the moral load and tones down the sharpness of his Latin models. He avoids the repetitious preaching of Phaedrus, who sometimes placed a moral at both the beginning and the end of his fables, and even omits the moral entirely or contrives to make it part of the story, spoken by one of the characters, rather than a mere appendage (I, 2, 4; II, 17, etc.). On occasion he extends the lesson and gives it a lyrical development, dwelling on the eternal ambitions of man (I, 3) or on freedom as man's most prized possession (IV, 13). Or the moral may receive an ironic twist, contrary to the spirit of the anecdote: "La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure" (I, 10). His originality can be seen very clearly in *Le Lion devenu vieux* (III, 14), a fable



as brief as its source, parallel to it in structure, yet completely different in emphasis. Phaedrus was hostile to the lion and portrayed him as the common enemy of other animals, as an oppressor who finally grows weak and is justly punished (I, 21). La Fontaine omits the moral and presents an eloquent, almost epic vignette which stresses the lion's dignity and suffering:

Le lion, terreur des forêts,  
 Chargé d'ans et pleurant son antique prouesse,  
 Fut enfin attaqué par ses propres sujets,  
 Devenus forts par sa faiblesse.  
 Le cheval s'approchant lui donne un coup de pied,  
 Le loup un coup de dent, le bœuf un coup de corne.  
 Le malheureux lion, languissant, triste et morne,  
 Peut à peine rugir, par l'âge estropié.  
 Il attend son destin, sans faire aucunes plaintes,  
 Quand voyant l'âne même à son antre accourir:  
 "Ah! c'est trop, lui dit-il: je voulais bien mourir;  
 Mais c'est mourir deux fois que souffrir tes atteintes."

The beauty of the fable arises from its feeling and its music, its compassionate tones, qualities which Phaedrus could not provide and which are characteristic of La Fontaine at his best.

The manuscript fables differ from his later ones mainly in their lack of amplitude. He seldom departs very far from his source material, seldom allows himself to digress or to embroider a theme. This stage of his fable technique will not last for long. Some of the manuscript pieces seem to be early drafts which he will retouch before their publication in 1668. If most of the changes are slight—details to improve rhythm and add clarity or concreteness (I, 3; II, 3; IV, 18; III, 14)—he now and then revises whole lines to introduce more descriptive matter (VI, 8) or extends the fable to greater length; *Le Loup et l'agneau* (I, 10) takes on six additional lines of delightful dialogue. Along with brevity, the manuscript fables are marked by an avoidance, or extremely limited use, of realistic description. They lack the vividness of the fables written a few years later; the characters are portrayed in simpler outlines, with fewer individual traits and gestures.

One sign betrays La Fontaine's hesitancy in conceiving the genre. He seems to have begun by excluding human beings as characters in fables. In the Conrart manuscript only one man is present and he is a symbol, "un malheureux" (I, 15). A note accompanying this fable

at the time of publication speaks of certain unnamed reasons which constrained the author to "rendre la chose ainsi générale." What a distance will he travel between "un malheureux" and "un pauvre bûcheron, tout couvert de ramée" in the poet's second and later version of the same subject (I, 16). Somewhere between the two, presumably, stands the Sainte-Geneviève manuscript, which contains two old men, one of them a hazy figure standing for cowardice (VI, 8), the other an almost real person in a fable where La Fontaine deliberately abandons his sources "pour peindre nos mœurs" (IV, 18). At first, apparently, while still a disciple of Phaedrus, he tended to avoid the many fables where his master introduced human actors. (Was this because Phaedrus's men have so little color and seem at times to be merely another species of animal, the "genus homo"?) As a result, the manuscript fables include a high percentage of short animal pieces, such as *Le Corbeau et le renard*, the kind of fables which French children memorize and recite fondly in their first years at school. Simpler in every way—morally, psychologically, poetically—than the fables composed around 1665 to 1668, they represent a first step, on the whole a very sure step, in La Fontaine's conception and practice of a new genre. His art will become more complex with the passing of time, but he has set his course and will not need to change it.

### 3. *Aesop in the fables of 1668.*

After Phaedrus, in the evolution of La Fontaine's fables, came Aesop. But it is important to distinguish the various Aesops that he knew. One was a group of fables, about 300 in number, accumulated in ancient Greece and gathered together around the name of Aesop. Along with this, and almost inseparable from it in La Fontaine's mind, was another body of fable literature written by a multitude of later fabulists, a sort of fable library which included his volume of Nevelet and other collections in Latin, Italian, and French. A third Aesop, just as real to him, just as dear to him as his books, was the personality of the Phrygian slave, the legendary first creator of the apologue, who somehow symbolized for him all the wit and wisdom of antiquity.

The Greek fables associated with Aesop undoubtedly made a

deep impression upon him. His praise for them in the preface of 1668 should perhaps be discounted; at the moment he was trying very hard to add dignity and importance to his chosen genre and went out of his way to show that Aesop's fables had won the approval of Plato and Socrates. These were influential names which could help forestall hostile criticism of his book. But he was surely not insincere, for he would express the same appreciation of Aesop's fables 25 years later, at a time when his own fame was safely established, in dedicating Book XII to the Duke of Burgundy: "un ouvrage dont l'original a été l'admiration de tous les siècles aussi bien que celle de tous les sages." He speaks with more personal feeling in the note which accompanies *La Mort et le bûcheron* (I, 16), a fable which he composed expressly so that he could take advantage of "un des plus beaux traits qui fût dans Ésope." Still treating of Aesop the note goes on to say: "Nous ne saurions aller plus avant que les anciens: ils ne nous ont laissé pour notre part que la gloire de les bien suivre." One wonders what he found to admire in the Aesopic fables. Even briefer, generally, than those by Phaedrus, written in the plainest prose, almost devoid of literary merit, they all followed the same pattern: a terse anecdote followed by the inevitable moral, the whole thing as dry and impersonal as a syllogism or a mathematical demonstration. They do not lack for clarity, nor for simplicity, nor for amusing situations quickly resolved, nor for an occasional "beau trait" or neatly phrased maxim, but these qualities, to be enjoyed, require a certain childish ingenuousness on the part of the reader, or else a lively imagination. A reader such as La Fontaine, with his delight in simple pranks and pleasures, above all with his gift for seeing real life in even the most arid of abstractions, was well endowed to enjoy the fables of Aesop. But without saying so he was perhaps attracted to them most by their artistic inadequacy, for he was a poet in search of material; he needed imperfect and neglected sources which he could exploit and enhance to the fullest.

Aesopic moral lessons appealed to La Fontaine, partly because of their homely, common sense quality, their avoidance of disputable extremes, and he would willingly adopt them and teach them as his own. Also, La Fontaine preferred stories, no matter how brief, to moral theories and systems. If he acclaimed Aesop as a great thinker it was because of the sugar coating that made the pill palatable:

“Quant à Ésope, il me semble qu'on le devait mettre au nombre des sages dont la Grèce s'est tant vantée, lui qui enseignait la véritable sagesse, et qui l'enseignait avec bien plus d'art que ceux qui en donnent des définitions et des règles.” These words occur at the beginning of *La Vie d'Esope* in a passage where La Fontaine complains that history has failed to record the lives of the world's greatest men, Homer and Aesop in particular. He is thinking not only of the fables but of their author, the crafty slave of legend who taught useful lessons to many masters, kings, and philosophers. Aesop the man was an almost mythological figure and possessed a peculiar fascination which La Fontaine could not resist.

The myth of Aesop survived mainly in a biography, a work of very uncertain date and authorship but long attributed to Planudes, a Byzantine monk and scholar who flourished early in the fourteenth century. Humanists of La Fontaine's day accepted Planudes as the author but insisted that the biography was pure fiction, merely a series of anecdotes, teeming with impossibilities and anachronisms, which sketched the character of Aesop so as to correspond to the teachings of the fables. La Fontaine knew the opinions of scholars but simply could not accept them. He loved Aesop, the personality of Aesop as described by Planudes, and could not bear to question the authenticity of the medieval biography. To defend Planudes he invented some astounding arguments.<sup>1</sup> The biography had been criticized because it contained a large element of horseplay and practical joking. But La Fontaine replied: “Qui est le sage à qui de pareilles choses n'arrivent point? Toute la vie de Socrate n'a pas été sérieuse.” Then, disregarding the possibility that Planudes might have read Plutarch, he pointed out that the two authors agree in their characterization of Aesop. Finally, Planudes must be believed because he lived closer to the events than we do: “Comme Planude vivait dans un siècle où la mémoire des choses arrivées à Ésope ne devait pas être encore éteinte, j'ai cru qu'il savait par tradition ce qu'il a laissé.” This reasoning comes from a man who clung to his dreams, a man who preferred an act of faith to the facing of disagreeable facts. Throughout his fables he would refer repeatedly to Aesop's character, to his manner of expression, to his physical ugliness, for to him Aesop was a real person, as real as Plato or Horace.

The biography supposedly written by Planudes often appeared in fable collections, in Greek and Latin versions in Nevelet for ex-

ample, and several French translations of it had also been published. It enjoyed considerable popularity in the seventeenth century, a fact which La Fontaine could not ignore. He undertook to prepare a new French translation of it to serve as an additional attraction for his projected volume of fables. But not a docile, word for word translation; he was incapable of doing this. With his usual disregard for consistency he defended the veracity of Planudes, then proceeded to revise or omit some parts of the Latin text—on esthetic rather than historical grounds—announcing that he has eliminated “ce qui m’a semblé trop puéril, ou qui s’écartait en quelque façon de la bienséance.” But these words, as always, are modest and do not do full justice to his craftsmanship. He did, indeed, leave out a number of Aesop’s adventures, notably certain Rabelaisian incidents dealing with urinary and intestinal functions. But he also abridged his source, sometimes very drastically, sensing that the tedious narrative of Planudes needed to be quickened and made less cumbersome. At the same time he tried to remove its rough edges, introducing smooth transitions to carry the story along. The result is a short but charming biography of Aesop, or rather a novelette with Aesop at its center, written in La Fontaine’s limpid, intimate prose style, which still is frequently published in editions of the fables, and which still is read with pleasure when Planudes has been almost completely forgotten. The life of Aesop, whose personality and vicissitudes sometimes resemble those of Zadig, was transformed from a medieval compendium into a sort of *conte philosophique*, into a work which Voltaire surely relished, and which he perhaps remembered as he composed his own novels.

Although La Fontaine liked to dwell complacently on the history of the fable in ancient times, although he was extremely sensitive to differences in literary styles, he would seldom single out Aesop or Abstemius or Babrios for deliberate imitation. He would dip into them all, and many others too, not systematically as he had done in the case of Phaedrus, but seemingly at random, sometimes reading many versions of the same fable, finding an anecdote here, a moral reflexion there, a useful detail somewhere else. This change in method, from imitation of one author to a gleaning process among a multitude of sources, was perhaps dictated by the bareness and poverty of the genre. Most of the Aesopic fables were exceedingly short. La Fontaine would gladly take advantage of any felicitous

ideas or colorful expressions available in his predecessors, but this required considerable searching. It is not easy even to list all the books he referred to while preparing his volume of 1668. They include fables or fable collections by Avianus, Babrios, Romulus, Abstemius, Faerno, Doni, Verdizzotti, Alciati, Guérout, Cousin, Corrozet, Hegemon, Haudent, Marot, and Mathurin Régnier. It is even harder, and perhaps not worth the trouble, to untangle the maze of readings and reminiscences which a single fable can reflect. In a few simpler cases editors have sorted out the threads, for example the mixture of Avianus, Aesop and Phaedrus in *La Besace* (I, 7),<sup>2</sup> but even here it may have been Rabelais, or Plutarch, or someone else, who led La Fontaine to his subject. He not only mingled many fruits to brew a delicious cocktail of his own, but began to stir in a greater amount of his own inventiveness, half-forgetting his books and leaving his models far behind.

This was a great stride forward. Whatever the reason—whether prodded onward by his friends, whether under pressure to write at greater length so as to fill out his book, whether aware that brief animal pieces might grow monotonous if not relieved by other types of poetry—he embarked on a new method of composition which allowed him far greater freedom of expression. Instead of following Phaedrus or some other source with as little deviation as possible he now relied confidently on his own powers and began writing fables which have very little in common with the Aesopic tradition. Henceforth he permits himself to make sweeping changes in his subject matter, revising the basic situation, or the events of the story, or the outcome of it, or occasionally the moral conclusion. He of course almost always keeps enough of the original pattern for the reader to recognize it—since the charm of fables arises in part from their familiarity—but the pattern becomes enriched with countless new features: new incidents, new visual effect, new characterization, new comments or reflections, new musical qualities. One consequence of this technique is that the story now outweighs the moral. In Aesop and Phaedrus and most other fabulists the story played a secondary part, merely reinforcing or illustrating the moral lesson. But La Fontaine reversed the roles, introducing in his fables all the tale-telling art which he had mastered in his *Contes*, stretching the Aesopic apologue into a luxuriant narrative sometimes 40 or more lines in length. Occasionally he would dwell for a moment

too on some lesson which appealed to him; but more often he would limit it to a few perfunctory lines, or even suppress it and let the story speak for itself as in *Le Chêne et le roseau* (I, 22). Very often a brief maxim or epigram serves his purpose, merely a couplet at the beginning or end of the fable (I, 8; III, 18, etc.), or even a single line. In some of his most successful fables—such as *L'Alouette et ses petits* (IV, 22), *Phébus et Borée* (VI, 3), *Le lièvre et la tortue* (VI, 10), or *Le Chartier embourbé* (VI, 18)—one instructive verse suffices to round out a story told at considerable length, with the result, of course, that the ancient didactic intention of the fable almost disappears from sight.

But what a gain offsets this loss! As his fables grew longer, as he departed more and more from his sources, he transformed the austere anecdotes of Aesop into brilliant dramatic scenes. Each actor has a clear-cut personality, his gestures and words are reported in detail, his motives and actions lead swiftly forward until the dramatic problem is resolved. Some of La Fontaine's fables and their Aesopic sources have been compared by various scholars, notably in an excellent chapter by René Bray, to demonstrate the poet's additions to his models. What he adds is everything. Taking the bare bones of old apologues, he endowed them with flesh, with life, with humor, with character analysis, with dialogue, with feeling, with exquisite verse, in a word with all the art of poetic genius.

The difference between his early, closely imitative manner and his full-fledged freedom of a few years later can be seen in countless examples; the contrast is particularly sharp in *La Cigale et la fourmi* (I, 1) and *La Mouche et la fourmi* (IV, 3), fables which have virtually the same subject. In the first the ant's character is scarcely shown; she is "pas prêteuse" and makes a cruel retort to her neighbor: "Eh bien! dansez maintenant." In the other fable, however, she answers the arrogant, improvident fly with a prim lecture 30 lines long on the dangers of vainglorious boasting. Angry and impatient, she points out bluntly at first, then with more and more elaborate and irrational arguments, the fly's importunity and parasitic existence. Then she dwells complacently on the comfortable life she will lead, long after the fly is dead:

. . . vous mourrez de faim,  
De froid, de langueur, de misère,  
Quand Phébus régnera sur un autre hémisphère.

Alors je jouirai du fruit de mes travaux.  
 Je n'irai par monts ni par vaux  
 M'exposer au vent, à la pluie;  
 Je vivrai sans mélancolie.

But soon she recalls guiltily that she has work to do and must not waste her time:

Adieu: je perds le temps; laissez-moi travailler:  
 Ni mon grenier ni mon armoire  
 Ne se remplit à babiller.

With this the fly and the ant—or the chorus girl and the housewife—both of them subtle, complex characters, more human than animal, part company and go their separate ways. As for the moral lesson expressed by the fly—"Je vous enseignerai par là / Ce que c'est qu'une fausse ou véritable gloire"—does La Fontaine believe this or does he have his tongue in his cheek? Is not the real conclusion something else: the incompatibility yet sameness of two human types, each one the victim of vanity?

Having transformed the animal fable into a vehicle to express his observation of mankind, La Fontaine quite naturally widened the scope of the genre to embrace different patterns, techniques, and tones. His wide reading undoubtedly aided him; he had seen among French fabulists of the sixteenth century fables which came close to being epistles, or satires, or tales in verse. At first timid in introducing human beings in his fables, he soon went further than any one of his sources and began writing numerous pieces about men and women, about Jupiter and mythological beings such as the sun and the winds, about trees and plants, even about inanimate objects. Of course animals remained his favorites but his unflinching quest for variety led him to other characters and other levels or styles of expression. While it is not our purpose to add to the long list of appreciations or interpretations devoted to La Fontaine's fables, it seems important, for understanding the evolution of the genre, to discuss very briefly the wide range of poetic manners in the volume of 1668.

Some of the fables might better be called descriptions or scenes of country life. *La Mort et le bûcheron* (I, 16) comes straight from Aesop, but its heavy lines reveal close knowledge of the hard lot of the seventeenth-century peasant, along with a sympathetic yet



amused understanding of his character. *Le Meunier, son fils et l'âne* (III, 1) begins with a meditative prologue which introduces Malherbe in a conversation with Racan. Malherbe (in a strangely relaxed mood) then proceeds to tell the absurd story of the miller and his ass, spicing it with colloquial, rustic language and snatches of a popular song—all this in hearty Alexandrines which suggest the satires of Régnier or Boileau. In *La Vieille et les deux servantes* (V, 6) La Fontaine deals realistically and compassionately with the sufferings of two servant girls and sides with them in an extremely cynical moral lesson; yet he gives the fable an air of irreality and softens its social criticism by numerous allusions to ancient mythology. Perhaps the liveliest of these rural scenes is *Le Jardinier et son seigneur* (IV, 4), with its delicate description of the farmer's garden and the boisterous invasion of the hunting party. This story without precedent in fable literature, clearly inspired for the most part by La Fontaine's own experience as "capitaine des chasses," becomes a fable by the simple device of a moral reflection pinned at the end and somehow takes its place, proudly and legitimately, as one of the best of La Fontaine's efforts in the genre.

Like these dramas of country life there are several other pieces which a reader bent on following rules would find hard to classify, and which he might label tales in verse rather than fables. In *L'Ivrogne et sa femme* (III, 7), one finds the same sort of Bacchic situation, the same sort of ruse employed by a crafty wife, as in La Fontaine's tales—but of course no indecency. One of the important themes of the fables, as of the tales, is the satire of women—of their contrary nature in *La Femme noyée* (III, 16), of their ill-kept vows of marital fidelity in *La Jeune Veuve* (VI, 21)—but here again the poet writes with a very light touch and avoids any trace of suggestiveness. These pieces could have been included very appropriately in a volume of tales but they are not out of harmony with the fables. There is not always a clear line of demarcation between the two genres, as La Fontaine conceived them in the years around 1668, except that the fables have a higher moral plane and usually more elegance and concision than the tale in verse. At this date the brevity of Aesop and Phaedrus still held some slight sway over the poet's mind.

The fables of 1678-79, with their lyrical plenitude and their philosophic overtones, are sometimes heralded in those which ap-

peared ten years earlier. The age-old allegory of *Les Membres et l'estomac* (III, 2) is amplified into a series of reflections on the important role of kings in maintaining the national economy (despite other fables, the product of other moods and other sources, which seem to criticize royal authority as oppressive). In *L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits* (II, 13), La Fontaine tells the story in four swift lines; then the topic of fortune-telling and charlatanism serves him as pretext to launch into a magnificent meditation on divine providence, uttered in tones of unmistakable awe before God and the majesty of the universe:

Quant aux volontés souveraines  
De Celui qui fait tout, et rien qu'avec dessein,  
Qui les sait que lui seul? Comment lire en son sein?  
Aurait-il imprimé sur le front des étoiles  
Ce que la nuit des temps enferme dans ses voiles?

This is only a fragment of a highly sustained and logically developed piece of eloquence, in which Virgilian poetry comes close to the oratory of Bossuet.

Epic accents find their way into many other fables, whether short or long. Even the smallest of vignettes, such as *L'Oiseau blessé d'une flèche* (II, 6), may be expressed in solemn, elevated verse:

Mortellement atteint d'une flèche empennée,  
Un oiseau déplorait sa triste destinée . . .

—a tone which is maintained to the very end of the fable. Or this melancholy tone may be transmuted into an elegy in miniature, like *Philomèle et Progné* (III, 15), where the poet takes the subject intact from Babrios but gives it a gentle delicacy and sadness of his own. But usually the serious notes are mixed with lighter ones, with forthright preciousness in *Le Lion amoureux* (IV, 1), with gay yet tender comedy of character in *Le Lièvre et les grenouilles* (II, 14), with playfully exaggerated absurdity in *Le Chat et un vieux rat* (III, 18), with sly satire of manners in *La Goutte et l'araignée* (III, 8). These few examples should suffice to show that there is no tag or formula capable of describing the fables of La Fontaine. Each fable differs from every other one in its manner and technique. The collection of 1668, in its totality, culminates the work of some 20 or 30 years on the part of a most versatile poet, a poet who had devoted most of

his life to experimentation and self-discipline in a great variety of poetic styles. Without his studies of Latin poetry, or his hopes and disappointments at Vaux, or his tales in verse, or *Clymène*, something would be lacking in the fables of 1668.

It is necessary to insist, still again, on his careful, deliberate workmanship. The irresponsibility of his life, his gift for improvisation, the air of carelessness in certain fables, have helped to spread the legend that he wrote poetry with quick, gay abandon. He may have composed swiftly, to be sure, but only after much reading and a prolonged immersion in his subject. He never failed to return to his work, carefully retouching it before publication, and he always took into consideration the advice of friendly critics with whom he discussed every literary project. The slow growth of compositions conceived at Vaux, and the variants and revisions of the manuscript tales and fables, reveal very clearly La Fontaine's thoughtful and conscientious labors. So do his proofreading and the tables of *errata* which he drew up. So do the three surviving notes to Maucroix concerning fables submitted to his friend, three among scores which he must have written (*OD*, 587). One of them was written on the back of a manuscript copy of *La Mouche et la fourmi* (IV, 3):

Il faut que tu aies oublié quelque chose dans la copie, car ce qui est au crayon ne s'y rapporte pas. Du reste j'ai corrigé cela, et je t'envoie une autre copie. J'aime mieux que tu me recueilles le tout. J'ai un conte à te faire. Adieu.

Another of these notes, on a copy of *La Jeune Veuve* (VI, 21), refers to two versions of this fable and other pieces which have been corrected:

En voici encore, et je n'y trouve plus rien à changer. Il ne me semble pas que je doive me rendre à tes scrupules; ma veuve est également sincère dans ses deux états. Adieu.

The third note, some years later in date, deals with two of the "fables nouvelles" which La Fontaine published in 1671:

Mets cette fable [*L'Huître et les plaideurs*, IX, 9] dans ton recueil et fais-en ton profit. Je ne te manderai pas mon sentiment sur tes derniers vers, qui m'ont édifié . . .

Adieu. J'ai trois autres fables sur le chantier.  
J'ai refait *Le Gland et la Citrouille* [IX, 4].

This interchange of letters and manuscripts between La Fontaine and Maucroix went on incessantly and to the very end of their days. A recently discovered letter by La Fontaine, a detailed commentary for Maucroix on the priest's translation of some Latin homelies, shows La Fontaine in 1693, as ever before, a sensitive reader and critic, scrupulously attentive to words and their meaning, to syntax, to rhythm, to imagery, to transitions—to every problem of a writer's craft.<sup>3</sup>

It is not hard to picture La Fontaine at work as he prepared the fables of 1668. Now in Paris, now in Château-Thierry, he would divide his time between relaxation and his literary tasks, between conviviality and hours of solitude devoted to dreaming, reading, napping, writing, and retouching. No composition could hold his attention for very long; he had to keep changing his activities. He would turn restlessly from his writing table to a stroll in the open air, to a visit with friends, to the perusal of a book. But he did not lack perseverance and, to vary his program and increase his production, he would keep several pieces at hand, fables and tales in different stages of completion, so that he could go from one to another. His work was one of embellishment, a constant effort to improve upon rather crude subject matter, giving it elegance and charm and respectability. For this he relied on his books, on his knowledge of life, on his imagination, on his reveries; the time spent dreaming was never lost. His distractions did not prevent him from keeping a deadline always in mind: the departure of the next mail coach for Rheims. Since his problem was to detect and please the tastes of his times, he carried on an almost scientific checking process, constantly circulating his poems to Maucroix and to trusted friends in Paris.<sup>4</sup> In 1668 he could count with some certainty on the success of his book, saying that the "indulgence que l'on a eue pour quelques-unes de mes fables" gave him reason to hope for a favorable reaction from the public (*Fables*, Préface). By this time he had composed well over a hundred fables, had imitated then abandoned the fables of antiquity, had gained mastery of his own very free technique, and had arrived at an elastic but sure conception of his newly created genre.

#### 4. *Theory of the fable in verse.*

The preface of 1668, and several of the fables themselves, gave La Fontaine the opportunity to air his theories and aims as a fabulist. These ideas, so important for understanding his artistic aspirations, cannot easily be reduced to their chronological order. Some may go back to the days of his preoccupation with Phaedrus, others may have been evolved toward the time when the fables were published. Another difficulty is to know whether theory or practice came first. Did La Fontaine plan out certain intentions which he then realized in the fables, or did he write his poetry and later proceed to discuss it in order to justify and gain appreciation for the techniques employed? In all likelihood the truth lies somewhere between these possibilities or in a combination of them. No doubt he indulged in much theorizing both before and during the composition of his poems, but without setting the theories down on paper. The actual expression of them, in the preface and in various prologues, was probably undertaken later, after much experimentation, after writing the bulk of the fables, and after achieving a high degree of confidence in the validity of his art.

When he composed his earliest efforts, those in the Conrart manuscript, he seemed to have only two dominant convictions: that the fable should be as brief as possible and that it could be treated suitably in verse. These two very simple ideas, which he found in Phaedrus, formed the first axioms of his critical thinking. But as he mulled them over during the span of several years, they became more subtle and more complex in their inter-relationship, amounting finally to a comprehensive theory of the fable in verse.

La Fontaine never completely abandoned, in his collection of 1668, the notion that fables should be contained in the smallest possible capsule. In his preface he cites concision of form as a criterion by which the public can properly judge a fable's excellence: "... si ce tour est moins long, il sera sans doute plus approuvé." At the same time he candidly admits his own inability to stay within the narrow limits set by Phaedrus. The problem bothered him, as can be felt in his discussion of it (VI, 1), where he extolls ancient fabulists but notes that some people have criticized the succinctness of Phaedrus and seems to express distaste for the four-line fables of Babrios: "Il renferme toujours son conte en quatre vers: / Bien

ou mal, je le laisse à juger aux experts." And how often, in practice, he stretches his poems to five or six times the length of their sources! The fact is that the idea of minimum length was gradually being supplanted in his mind by a more flexible corollary: the idea that fables should leave something unsaid. Instead of treating a subject in full detail and pointing out all possible conclusions, the artist should use understatement and suggestion, thus stimulating the reader's imagination. Nothing could be more natural than this opinion: the charm of Aesopic fables, as La Fontaine must have sensed, lies in their anecdotic quality, their familiarity and their quickness and their vagueness. Like a modern joke or limerick, they unroll swiftly and reach an amusing or disconcerting climax, leaving the listener in surprised meditation, perhaps picturing himself in the same predicament or summoning up in his memory and imagination appropriate people and situations to complete the canvas.

This theory of suggestion, of stating the essentials while implying much besides, of evoking emotions without declaring them, of explosive constraint, was of course the great motivating force of French classicism; La Fontaine could not escape it. But his fables of 1668, while demonstrating the principle on every page—in withheld descriptions, in discreet insinuations, in muted feelings—seldom express the author's awareness of this aesthetic ideal. The epilogue after Book VI hints at it: "Loin d'épuiser une matière / On n'en doit prendre que la fleur,"—although the author is concerned here more with the scope of his volume than with individual poems. It was not until some years later that he defined clearly the classical theory of rigorously chosen evocative details:

Cent exemples pourraient appuyer mon discours;  
 Mais les ouvrages les plus courts  
 Sont toujours les meilleurs. En cela j'ai pour guide  
 Tous les maîtres de l'art, et tiens qu'il faut laisser  
 Dans les plus beaux sujets quelque chose à penser. (X, 14)

These reflections occur in a fable 70 lines long, a fable where La Fontaine allows himself to digress rather freely. Clearly he does not mean that works are best if reduced to the laconic extremes of Aesop and Phaedrus. Rather he is saying that a fable, short or long, must omit many things and leave "quelque chose à penser."

While his ideal of brevity led toward simplicity and plainness, his

ideal of writing fables in verse led in the opposite direction. This was a theory of adornment. The bare prose of Aesop could not be rendered in verse without being amplified; poetry, by its very nature, relies on a certain richness of texture—rhyme, rhythm, imagery, sense impressions—for its effectiveness. La Fontaine's doctrine of imitation, which he had already expounded in *Clymène*, authorized him to revise or embellish any subject, no matter how well known. A traditional, accepted subject has a great advantage, as La Fontaine and his contemporaries realized; it is already "vraisemblable," it is already charged with meaning. His problem was to take the familiar fables of Aesop and to expand them, adding his own details, his own artistic conception, so as to endow them with elegance and refinement. As he said in his preface: "J'ai pourtant considéré que ces fables étant sues de tout le monde, je ne ferais rien si je ne les rendais nouvelles par quelques traits qui en relevassent le goût."

What he wanted to add, first of all, was poetry. He began his preface of 1668 by answering critics, such as Patru, who claimed that fables must be brief and totally unadorned. Modestly but without yielding way, he urged his friend to reconsider, claiming that the Spartan austerity of ancient fables need not prevent them from being treated by modern poets:

Cette opinion ne saurait partir que d'un homme d'excellent goût; je demanderais seulement qu'il en relâchât quelque peu, et qu'il crût que les grâces lacédémoniennes ne sont pas tellement ennemies des muses françaises que l'on ne puisse souvent les faire marcher de compagnie.

He of course concedes that lush lyricism would be out of place in fables—as in any other genre during the reign of classicism—but he insists on poetry all the same. His title, *Fables choisies, mises en vers*, far from being modest, was meant to emphasize his boldness as an innovator. He spoke of this with great satisfaction in introducing his work: "je me suis flatté de l'espérance que si je ne courais dans cette carrière avec succès, on me donnerait au moins la gloire de l'avoir ouverte." The preface does not elaborate his purposes as a poet; for these *Clymène* offers more information, with its devotion to Horace and its emphasis on stylistic variety. Or a glance at the fables themselves will quickly reveal the principles which guided him. He sought diversity, to be sure, and each fable has its own style and mood. But his general treatment of the genre shows that he

was aiming deliberately at the creation of supple, iridescent poetry, never pompous, never over-emphatic, never lengthily descriptive, expressed in the slippery and ever-changing medium of "vers libres," marked by subtle transitions and gradations in tone, a kind of poetry which is never richly decorative but which relies for its suggestive power on carefully selected details and images or on the skillful use of stylistic devices such as alliteration, assonance, pacing of rhythms, or surprises in phrasing. He would hold to this conception of the verse appropriate for fables throughout the rest of his career, only enlarging it slightly, in later years, to admit more freedom for meditation and personal lyricism.

He consciously made one other very important addition to fables in the Aesopic tradition, what he called lightness or charm. The public, as he said in his preface, demanded not only novelty and elegance but also a certain pleasurable quality or "gaieté," a word which he felt obliged to define: "Je n'appelle pas gaieté ce qui excite le rire, mais un certain charme, un air agréable qu'on peut donner à toutes sortes de sujets, même les plus sérieux." This intangible quality, which La Fontaine achieved so eminently, partakes of poetic technique, for undoubtedly the dancing movement of the verse itself is radiant with charm, but it seems to arise mainly from his impertinent attitude toward his material, from his refusal to take anything wholly seriously. He purposely enlivened sober apologies with all the humorous tricks at his command—with witty repartee, with amusing traits and gestures for his characters, with touches of satire, with playful exaggerations, with bits of absurd fancy, above all with his own delightful personality which appears everywhere in sly comments on the stories he is telling. He had mastered this art in his tales and proceeded to apply it to his fables, but of course with more delicacy and restraint.

Between the two poles of brevity and ornateness he instinctively found the right compromise, a reasonable succinctness and a restrained use of decorative qualities, enough of one and the other so that the fable would remain recognizable as such and yet become a work of art. At the beginning of Book V he speaks to his friend "B" of this problem:

Vous voulez qu'on évite un soin trop curieux  
Et des vains ornements l'effort ambitieux.



Je le veux comme vous; cet effort ne peut plaire.  
 Un auteur gâte tout quand il veut trop bien faire.  
 Non qu'il faille bannir certains traits délicats:  
 Vous les aimez, ces traits, et je ne les hais pas . . .

Although the text is rather vague, although it recalls in ways the poet's theory of negligence which applies better to his tales than to his fables, he seems to be saying that features of artistry, delicate or refined ones, are admissible and necessary in fables, if used in moderation. If he is trying to please a friend here, and speaks rather timidly, he shows more courage on other occasions. In his preface he insists that fables must be artistically effective; they must afford pleasure, even if this requires the author to go counter to his source or to sacrifice certain onerous moral lessons:

On ne considère en France que ce qui plaît; c'est la grande règle, et pour ainsi dire la seule. Je n'ai donc pas cru que ce fût un crime de passer par-dessus les anciennes coutumes lorsque je ne pouvais les mettre en usage sans leur faire tort . . . Horace . . . ne veut pas qu'un écrivain s'opiniâtre contre l'incapacité de son esprit, ni contre celle de sa matière.

The same ideas, expressed with blunt frankness, occur in the prologue to Book VI: "Une morale nue apporte de l'ennui; / Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui." The "conte" means not merely the anecdote, but the anecdote enriched and turned into poetry, i.e. everything that is pleasurable in the fable and without which the lesson cannot make its point. La Fontaine felt that the fable could not serve its traditional didactic purpose unless it were written in compliance with high standards of poetry and story-telling art.

What, then, happens to the fable's moral purpose? In the preface of 1668 La Fontaine makes some ridiculous claims for the instructive value of his fables. He points out, perhaps legitimately, that children love stories and learn from them, absorbing the lesson along with the tale, thus improving their character and judgment. Also, he says, readers of fables, particularly children, can gain some knowledge of natural history: "il leur faut apprendre ce que c'est qu'un lion, un renard." The only reason for these remarks is that La Fontaine had taken advantage of a traditional use for fables to dedicate his volume to the six year old prince; perhaps he even tried to conceal his dislike for young people, which he would not bother to do in later fables (Cf. IX, 2 and XI, 2). But it scarcely needs to be said

that the poet was not writing for an audience of children and that he took no interest in instructing them. And if any child learned about animals solely through the fables, what strange notions he would have! The poet comes closer to the truth when, on several occasions, he admits that, while trying to impart useful lessons, he doesn't always succeed: "Quant au principal but qu'Ésope se propose, / J'y tombe au moins mal que je puis" (V, 1). The moral was less important than the story, and could be retained or discarded according to its artistic adequacy, its possibilities for integration in the fable as a whole. Toward the end of his preface he says that he has eliminated "quelques moralités du succès desquelles je n'ai pas bien espéré." Or, again, he has suppressed "la moralité" in various places "où elle n'a pu entrer avec grâce, et où il est aisé au lecteur de la suppléer." When he invites the reader to draw his own moral he arrives at the brink of an idea whose implications he seems not to realize. The sensitive reader, especially if left to his own devices, may be impressed less by the conclusion inherent in the anecdote than by the emotional qualities of the poem—the attitude and vision of the world which it expresses. La Fontaine had little aptitude as a preacher but, without knowing it, he was very much a moralist in that he taught his own compassion, his own tolerance, his own amused outlook on life.

In another sense, here quite consciously, he could claim to offer profitable instruction, but as a satirist rather than as a moralist. Satire of manners figures only slightly in the manuscript fables, but soon the author begins departing widely from his sources "pour peindre nos mœurs," as he says in a fable (IV, 18) which relates how some brothers, the heirs to an estate, become estranged after a series of legal battles. He spoke from experience; this had happened to him and his own brother. Seldom a theorizing moralist, he did not often elaborate or even express with conviction the dry precepts of Aesop; his gift was to illustrate them, drawing upon his own knowledge of mankind. Many of the fables written by 1668 excel above all as social satire, as mockery of human faults and follies. La Fontaine was aware of this and even boasted of it:

Comme la force est un point  
 Dont je ne me pique point,  
 Je tâche d'y tourner le vice en ridicule,  
 Ne pouvant l'attaquer avec les bras d'Hercule.

C'est là tout mon talent: je ne sais s'il suffit.  
 Tantôt je peins en un récit  
 La sottie vanité jointe avecque l'envie,  
 Deux pivots sur qui roule aujourd'hui notre vie . . .  
 J'oppose quelquefois, par une double image,  
 Le vice à la vertu, la sottise au bon sens,  
 Les agneaux aux loups ravissants . . .

The vices are of course not those of animals; they belong to men and women. The poet's moral viewpoint and his technique have much in common with those of Molière: like the comedian he makes fun of any excess or abnormality, and he does so in the same way, by putting foolish people on the stage and letting them betray themselves by their own words and deeds.

The human quality of La Fontaine's satire is something he took for granted and scarcely bothered to mention. But it was not entirely absent from his mind, as can be seen from a curious echo of Paracelsus in the preface of 1668:

Les propriétés des animaux et leurs divers caractères y sont exprimés; par conséquent les nôtres aussi, puisque nous sommes l'abrégé de ce qu'il y a de bon et de mauvais dans les créatures irraisonnables. Quand Prométhée voulut former l'homme, il prit la qualité dominante de chaque bête: de ces pièces si différentes il composa notre espèce; il fit cet ouvrage qu'on appelle *le petit monde*. Ainsi ces fables sont un tableau où chacun de nous se trouve dépeint.

This bit of erudition, which La Fontaine proudly displayed but surely did not take very seriously, at least suggests that the poet knew what he was doing. The Aesopic apologue consisted nearly always of an animal story and a moral lesson for mankind. La Fontaine's originality was to humanize the whole fable, unifying the discordant elements. His animals inhabit their own world of forests and fields and barnyards, they encounter one another in situations which are fairly lifelike and natural; but they talk and act like men and women, like eternal character types whom every reader can recognize. Their problems are human ones and lead logically to some lesson or reflection on human relationships.

On the one hand unity of conception for each fable (with of course many studied fluctuations of style), on the other great variety for the book as a whole. The poet knew very well that any subject could be treated in a multitude of manners; this was the basis of

his theory of imitation. He had put the theory to practice in *Clymène* and he occasionally played the same game in his fable collection. There are several paired fables (I, 15 and 16; II, 11 and 12; VI, 1 and 2) where he demonstrates that a single source, or two similar sources, can give rise to widely different renderings. He liked to intermix short pieces and long ones, or farcical ones with others more serious in tone. In his preface he invites other poets to adopt the genre which he has originated, adding that they can either find other fables to exploit or reinterpret the ones he has chosen: "il ne sera pas difficile de donner un autre tour à celles-là même que j'ai choisies." He insisted more than any other author or critic of his age on the validity of various literary manners and on his right to juxtapose prose and verse, or verse pieces of divergent types, or lines of different lengths. He had a very good reason, his own temperament. Uncomfortable in long compositions, always searching for change, he could not write at his best unless allowed to shift continually from genre to genre and from style to style. Little wonder that he produced the most variegated masterpiece, the most dazzling virtuosity of poetic diction, that France has ever known. In accomplishing this, theory and art worked hand in hand. The keenness of his critical faculties, of his own awareness of his purposes as a poet, is demonstrated by the fact that he described his fables in a formula which has never been surpassed: "Une ample comédie à cent actes divers, / Et dont la scène est l'univers" (V, 1). These proud words, so admirable in their density, suggest at once the wide-ranging diversity of the fables, their human and dramatic qualities, their wealth of humor, and their universality of application. When he wanted to use them, and at least for his own works, La Fontaine could exercise very great talents as a critic and literary theorist. Few poets have gone about their tasks so knowingly, so well acquainted with their own talents and limitations, or with so much awareness of the aesthetic problems confronting them.

### 5. *Illustration and publication of the fables.*

To produce the fables of 1668 required the gifts of a poet and a man of business. La Fontaine took every precaution to insure the

success of his book. He dealt personally and carefully with many practical matters, working with printers and engravers, soliciting patronage at court, and cultivating valuable allies in literary circles and high society. Some of his diplomatic or commercial overtures deserve rather close scrutiny, since they may have affected the nature of the fables themselves. Like his deference to children, in the edition of 1668, certain other tendencies of his art may have been inspired by utilitarian motives. When his ideas seem docile or conservative, when he refrains from expressing his own opinions or distastes, was his understatement guided by considerations of artistry, or of prudence, or of both together?

One factor which may have influenced his conception of the fable, or at least the form of the published work, was the emblem book tradition. The importance of emblem books, a manifestation of the Renaissance love for allegorical didacticism, has only recently been recognized and closely studied. An emblem book, according to the usual pattern, is a collection of moral symbols; it contains allegorical pictures, often in groups of one hundred, each picture bearing a brief motto or *sententia* and accompanied by an explanatory passage, in prose or verse, which interprets the picture and motto and draws a moral lesson. Some of these books obtained prodigious popularity. The *Emblemata* of Alciati, for example, which dates from 1531, went through scores of editions during the sixteenth century, was translated from Latin into various European languages, and as time went on acquired an accretion of annotations and explanations from many hands. Emblem books and fable collections have some resemblance to one another, in spirit, in subject matter, and in physical appearance. One of each was compiled by Joachim Camerarius, *Fabulae aesopicae* and *Symbolorum et emblematum*, the latter containing 400 emblems, 100 picturing animals, 100 picturing reptiles and fish, etc. Gabriel Rollenhagen's *Nucleus emblematum* . . . contains many animal illustrations and details of natural history in the explanatory passages, and Orozco's volume of *Emblemas morales* includes some items which are based on fable lore. The overlapping of the two traditions can be seen again in Gilles Corrozet's rendering of Aesop in French verse, *Les Fables du très-ancien Esope* . . . , in which the page facing each fable displays a motto, a small engraving, and a moralizing quatrain.

La Fontaine knew the fables of Corrozet and dipped into various Renaissance emblem books. An investigator of the transmutations of the Greek Anthology in France has shown that two of his fables go back, ultimately, to the Anthology, but by way of emblem literature: *Le Trésor et les deux hommes* (IX, 16) probably echoes one of the fables scattered through Guillaume Guérout's *Premier Livre des Emblèmes*; and some features of *Le Rat et l'huître* (VIII, 9), are borrowed from Alciati's *Emblemata*.<sup>1</sup> Both Guérout and Alciati employed about a half dozen Aesopic themes which were in turn treated by La Fontaine. As he made his way through the maze of ancient fable literature was his choice of materials guided sometimes by the popularity which certain subjects had achieved during the sixteenth century?

Illustrated volumes of fables—like that of Nevelet—and also of emblems still thrived in the seventeenth century. A case in point is *Horatii Emblemata*, a collection of engravings by Otto van Veen accompanied by Stoic moral maxims taken from Horace and other ancient writers. First published in 1607, the book was soon translated into several modern languages and enjoyed a long posterity. In 1646 the French engraver Pierre Daret and the novelist Gomberville collaborated to produce a new version of it entitled *La Doctrine des mœurs*. Gomberville's task was to write a hundred paragraphs or pages of prose, explaining the moral of each picture, and to compose a hundred stanzas of verse in imitation of the passages in Latin. Brought out with much fanfare, dedicated to young Louis XIV, who was then nearing his eighth birthday, and publicized as a moral treatise for the instruction of young minds, the book's circumstances of publication may well have given La Fontaine some ideas on how to launch his fables. He and Gomberville, a very distinguished figure in his day, had probably come in contact with one another, for they had friends in common, such as Brienne, in literary and Jansenist quarters. It seems fairly certain that La Fontaine read *La Doctrine des mœurs*. He could have found in it many of the Christian-Stoic themes which pervade the fables of 1668 and some of his later works. His condemnation of astrologers (II, 13), his fable *La Mort et le mourant* (VIII, 1), and his treatment of the Philemon and Baucis legend all contain details which could be reminiscences of *La Doctrine des mœurs* (pp. 94, 97, 32).

Together with the persistent vogue of emblem books there should

be linked, possibly, another kind of symbolic picture: personal devices, crests, shields, and coats of arms. There is reason to think that the growing magnificence of Louis XIV's reign was attended by a revival of interest in chivalric and heraldic art. In *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* Voltaire makes a curious comment on a royal tilting match held in the *place du Carrousel* in 1662:

Ces fêtes ranimèrent plus que jamais le goût des devises et des emblèmes que les tournois avaient mis autrefois à la mode . . . Un antiquaire, nommé d'Ouvrier, imagina dès lors pour Louis XIV l'emblème d'un soleil dardant ses rayons sur un globe, avec ces mots: *Nec pluribus impar* . . . Cette devise eut un succès prodigieux. Les armoiries du roi, les meubles de la couronne, les tapisseries, les sculptures, en furent ornés . . . (Chapter 25)

Voltaire then criticizes the emblem for the inconsistency between its body and its soul, *i.e.* the figure and the legend. Just as La Fontaine, perhaps with the vocabulary of emblemology in mind, discusses the body and the soul of his fables—their story and their moral—in his preface of 1668.

These points, mentioned here merely in passing, give rise to many questions which can be answered only by art historians. In preparing the fables for publication La Fontaine obtained the services of François Chauveau, the artist who had done the frontispiece for the copy of *Adonis* presented to Fouquet. Was it La Fontaine or Chauveau who dictated the style of the vignettes which appeared with the fables, a style very much akin to that of the illustrations in Nevelet and in various emblem books? Was the fabulist impressed by all the pictures he had seen in emblem and fable collections, and did some of these visual effects find their way into his own writings? Did the woodcuts for Nevelet by the Nuremberg artist Virgil Solis somehow have an effect upon the fables—as Vossler has claimed, presumably with much exaggeration—giving them at times a Dürer-like clarity and a Germanic sentimentality?<sup>2</sup> And are there hidden personal allusions in the fables? Bearing in mind that one of the poet's earliest efforts employed a squirrel to symbolize Fouquet, one wonders whether a genealogist might not find other animals from armorial crests, behaving in a way which might flatter some noble family. And has Taine said too much, as it seems, or possibly not enough, on the parallelism between the hierarchies of human and animal society? Much fruitful research could be done on the possibili-

ties of allegorical interpretation of the fables, providing it is done delicately, avoiding the temptation to see a coherent system where none exists. La Fontaine had his moments when he indulged a taste for myths and symbols and parables, but clearly he was not a John Bunyan and never clung to systematic schemes for very long. This much can be said, however: he seems to have sensed the appeal of symbolism to his readers. He conceived his fables as an illustrated book and borrowed in some measure the technique of emblem and fable collections. He of course omitted such trappings as mottoes and explanations but he saw the advantage of presenting his subjects in a threefold combination of picture, story, and moral lesson. He knew, as simple common sense could tell him, that Chauveau's engravings would make his book more attractive and increase its sale.

An effort to please the ruling powers of church and state also helped to determine the character of the fables of 1668. In his prefatory remarks La Fontaine struggled ingeniously to demonstrate that ancient fables, although the product of a pagan world, seemed divinely inspired and taught eternal truths; perhaps the first author of "quelque chose de si divin" was Socrates, "celui des mortels qui avait le plus de communication avec les dieux." Then, dwelling on the Biblical quality of fables:

... s'il m'est permis de mêler ce que nous avons de plus sacré parmi les erreurs du paganisme, nous voyons que la Vérité a parlé aux hommes par paraboles; et la parabole est-elle autre chose que l'apologue, c'est-à-dire un exemple fabuleux, et qui s'insinue avec d'autant plus de facilité et d'effet qu'il est plus commun et plus familier?

Pious readers might be favorably impressed by these words and, still better, they would find religious themes in some of the fables themselves. Divine providence is treated not only in a famous meditation (II, 13), but also in a fable whose moral takes a religious turn:

Jupiter en usa comme un maître fort doux.  
 Concluons que la Providence  
 Sait ce qu'il nous faut mieux que nous. (VI,4)

Allied to this is the idea that we must resign ourselves to the lot God has given us (III, 4) and not keep complaining of our unhappy condition: "Nous fatiguons le Ciel à force de placets" (VI, 11). In such fables Jupiter keeps some of his pagan nature and is generally



called "le monarque des dieux," or at times he even plays a half-comic part, as in *L'Aigle et l'escarbot* (II, 8). But his character is Christianized and he appears usually as a great teacher, merciful and benevolent. On occasion the voice of God takes a different incarnation; it is Hercules who tells the wagon-driver how to get his wheels out of the mud and finally comments: "Aide-toi, le Ciel t'aidera" (VI, 18). There is no reason to question the sincerity of La Fontaine; the fables represent one side of his personality, as the tales do another. But clearly enough he wanted his fables to offend no one, and he guarded in advance every foreseeable point of attack. Without zealotry, without touching on controversial issues, he at least gave expression to certain broad religious convictions and made sure that his fables were a wholesome, Christian book, acceptable to the Church.

It was even more important to please the royal court. Since the fall of Fouquet, since the king's pension list in 1662 (which omitted the name of La Fontaine), since the honors and benefits heaped upon Molière, the poet could scarcely escape the ambition to win recognition and protection from Louis XIV. He would not always stay in good repute at Versailles, he would get into trouble with his *Contes* and would wait long for the king's approval of his election to the Academy, but there is no doubting the success of his campaign in favor of the fables of 1668. They could not have been dedicated to the young prince without the king's permission. There may even be some truth in the anecdotes which tell of La Fontaine going to court in person to present a copy of the book to the king and to receive a sum of money as a reward for his literary efforts.

Were his ambitions focused on the six-year old prince? It has been claimed that the idea of a book designed for the *dauphin* and dedicated to him may have led La Fontaine to writing fables, or may at least have influenced the tone and moral viewpoints of his volume. Possibly the idea crossed his mind. He seems to have known Périgny, the prince's tutor, and he may have desired to win fame by preparing a book which could make some contribution to the prince's education. This must have been a rather faint hope, however, expressed in the preface of 1668 but not a guiding force in the composition of the fables. In spite of his declarations in the preface, there is very little childishness in the fables themselves; they have none of the official air, none of the personal flattering touches, which envelop

the fables of Book XII written expressly for the education and amusement of another young prince, the Duke of Burgundy. In 1668 La Fontaine's main goal at court was not to instruct a child but rather—by means of the dedication and other procedures also—to make a favorable impression on the child's august father, Louis XIV. Like *Psyché* (then being redrafted and completed very soon after), the fables glow with courtly elegance which is only partially masked by tones of gay familiarity. They appealed to the same audience as did Molière's comedies, the diplomats and noblemen and sophisticated women who surrounded Louis XIV at Versailles.

But what of the poet's criticism of the nobility? Could this not have been inspired by the king's own distrust of high rank? One wonders whether La Fontaine would have satirized wealthy aristocrats so frequently and so severely if he had not been aware of Louis XIV's policy of a strong central power which would weaken or impoverish provincial noblemen and "grands seigneurs." The country squire who nonchalantly destroys his tenant's garden (IV, 4), the allusions to noble but empty heads (IV, 14) or to fine clothes concealing cowardly hearts (V, 21), the mule who boasts of his distinguished ancestry (VI, 7)—such pleasantries could very well have amused the king and the privileged friends and relatives in his retinue.

La Fontaine's attentiveness to the king's wishes can best be seen in certain fables whose moral lessons are devoted to questions of statesmanship or government policy. Whether for the young prince or for his father, the poet pointed out the difficulty of retaining control of foreign conquests (I, 13), dwelt on the economic necessity of "la grandeur royale" (III, 2), and seemingly voiced approval for the perennial campaigns to eliminate Protestantism:

Nous pouvons conclure de là  
Qu'il faut faire aux méchants guerre continuelle.  
La paix est fort bonne de soi,  
J'en conviens; mais de quoi sert-elle  
Avec des ennemis sans foi? (III, 13)

Louis XIV could have taken great satisfaction from *Le Lion s'en allant en guerre* (V, 19), a fable which shows the king of beasts wisely deploying his troops so as to make the best possible use of any abilities possessed by the various animals under his command,

with this conclusion at the end:

Le monarque prudent et sage  
De ses moindres sujets sait tirer quelque usage  
Et connaît les divers talents:  
Il n'est rien d'inutile aux personnes de sens.

La Fontaine's shaft has a double barb here, delicately flattering the king and at the same time requesting that merit, his own poetic merit, be recognized and rewarded. One can easily imagine such a fable being read aloud to the king by the poet, or by some influential emissary, and leading to the royal indulgence bestowed on the fables of 1668. It was not by accident that lions figured more prominently in the book than any other animal.

But the lions appear in company with numerous wolves and foxes, with humble rabbits and frogs, even with many insects. And the lion is sometimes merely "le plus fort," the arch-enemy of weaker animals. The one who plays sick in order to seize and eat his subjects who visit him in his cave (VI, 14) can scarcely be called a majestic or benevolent monarch; here La Fontaine intends no personal allusions and is merely presenting a traditional fable in deliciously humorous verse. What could the king and his son—especially if the "roi soleil" had his personal emblem in mind—have thought of *Le Soleil et les grenouilles* (VI, 12)? This fable tells of a tyrant who marries and, by having children, can multiply his tyranny, a thought which horrifies the frog kingdom and draws a sympathetic comment from the poet himself:

"... un seul soleil à peine  
Se peut souffrir: une demi-douzaine  
Mettra la mer à sec et tous ses habitants.  
Adieu joncs et marais: notre race est détruite.  
Bientôt on la verra réduite  
A l'eau du Styx." Pour un pauvre animal,  
Grenouilles, à mon sens, ne raisonnaient pas mal.

In all justice to La Fontaine it must be said that many of his fables on political topics have little or no applicability to seventeenth-century France and that very few of them are concerned with flattering the king. If Louis XIV read the whole volume carefully he must have found less approval for rulers than protest against them. This was only natural. A popular genre, the fable had come down through

the ages charged with the sufferings and complaints of common people, mistreated under every form of government. The handful of pieces written for the pleasure of the royal family merely add to the range of themes in a book whose predominant feature is unfailing variety.

The fables gave La Fontaine the opportunity to compliment other people besides the king. If he referred by their initials to Brienne and Maucroix—who deserved his gratitude but could not help greatly to advertise his book—he spelled out names in full when dedicating a fable to Mme de Sévigné's daughter (IV, 1) or when composing an allegory to praise the *Maximes* which had recently taken the aristocratic world by storm. The support of La Rochefoucauld and of the Sévigné family could win him readers in the most eminent levels of society. The high auspices under which the fables made their appearance would seem to discredit the claim made by Boileau (in his old age when he liked to picture himself as having been the leader of a literary school) that he persuaded a publisher to accept La Fontaine's manuscript. Barbin and Denis Thierry, the two firms associated in the publication of the fables, in all probability welcomed very warmly the chance to bring out this book by an author already well known for his tales in verse. All the more so since the book could be sold and read more openly than the tales and since it already bore the stamp of acceptance by the best society in Paris and Versailles.

The final printed form of the fables required the arrangement of many short compositions in readable order or groups. The architecture of the volume, which has never been studied, might yield some of its secrets to a very patient and sensitive investigator. It has been noted already that La Fontaine's plan owed much to Phaedrus and that the time when fables were composed seems, in a general way, to be reflected by their place in the published collection. Some of the author's intentions are fairly obvious. He divided his volume into six books containing about 20 fables apiece. The division into books held a double advantage. It offered convenient landmarks or resting places to readers who like to lay books aside and return to them, and it gave the author appropriate opportunities to take up his subject in a series of fresh starts, making room for cherished prologues or dedicatory passages. The poet went to some pains to make the beginning and end of each book quite brilliant or memorable.

Book I, coming after a long preface, the life of Aesop, and the dedication, dispenses with introductory matter; it begins briskly with *La Cigale et la fourmi* and comes to a resounding close with *Le Chêne et le roseau*. In Books II to VI the first fable is headed by some sort of prologue containing the poet's most important reflections on his art. The last fable in every case except Book V (a mysterious exception), stands out as a piece of some length to which the author has devoted his very best talents, such as *La Jeune Veuve*. His concern for providing impressive finales can be seen in a small rearrangement which he made after the edition of 1668. Sensing, apparently, that Book IV ended rather weakly in the original edition (with *L'Avare qui a perdu son trésor*) he added two fables taken from the end of Book III. As a result of this change Book IV now reaches its conclusion with the charming lyricism of *L'Alouette et ses petits* and in Book III a dazzling burlesque, *Le Chat et un vieux rat*, previously somewhat submerged, occupies the prominent final position.

The internal organization of each book is far more elusive. As one travels from fable to fable one meanders in an uncharted world. La Fontaine's plan, if he had one, possessed all the flexibility of his poetic style. It seems probable that he made no attempt to construct a systematic or logical development of ideas. After a hesitant start in the first pages of Book I, he apparently sought to make each fable invitingly different from those which came just before and after it. But he was less interested, it seems, in variety of length or subject or idea than in variety of tone and manner.

Whoever studies this problem will surely find musicianship the key to it. Successive fables bring in a new note, a rise or fall in pitch; a shift in sonority or intensity, a slowing or quickening of cadence. The six books of fables published in 1668 (and of course the books which followed, ten years later) are subtly and sinuously orchestrated. Between their bold opening lines and their vigorous climax lies a devious and unpredictable development—variations on many themes, runaway fugues, rollicking folk dances, bits of haunting melody, prancing notes for a graceful ballet, solemn chords for an epic or religious interlude—a development which carries the reader along and sustains his interest to the end. Without pretentiousness, perhaps without quite meaning to do so, La Fontaine gave the world six masterpieces in 1668, or rather a complex symphony in six nonchalant but harmonically perfect movements.

## Conclusion

With the triumph of the fables in 1668, La Fontaine became a public figure whose activities would be observed and recorded far more fully than before. His contacts at the salon of Mme de La Sablière, his relations with Lulli and other composers, his eventual rise to prestige at the Academy and at the Court—all this is fairly clear in comparison with the mysteries of his apprenticeship, the fleeting, frustrated dreams at Vaux, or the trials and struggles as he worked at the early tales and fables. This study has brought the poet only to a halfway point in his career, only to the conception and composition of his first great volume of poetry. Still ahead of him lay *Psyché*, further books of tales and fables, opera librettos, poems in many genres, in sum another twenty-five years of ceaseless devotion to literature. The development of his poetic art in these riper years deserves to be investigated and could be probed with considerable sureness; abundant documentary evidence is available. But the publication of the fables of 1668 clearly marks the end of La Fontaine's formative period, a logical stopping-place for the present essay which is concerned only with the obscure years of fitful study and manifold exploration before the poet settled down to a steady literary program.

By 1668 he was fully himself. The slow preparation and final creation of the fables form a complete, coherent phase in the life-long evolution of his art. In later years his mind would grow more mellow, his pondering of moral questions would become both more personal and more searching, he would enlarge the fable in verse to make it even more comic and even more stirring in its lyricism, but his language and style would undergo no further transformations. He would of course continue to vary and develop his means of expression, but without further uncertainty, without trial and error. Throughout his early life he was tormented by stylistic problems and kept searching restlessly for the right poetic manner—appropriate for his subject, for himself, for the public. His quest reached its end in the fables of 1668; he had conquered his place in the literary world and had won acceptance for a style that was patiently evolved and uniquely his own.

To reach his goal required tenacity combined with docility. While carefully guarding his own freedom, he was always eager to learn, always responsive to criticism, always glad to experiment with different literary techniques, always willing to discipline his pen and revise what he had written. Although, in the conventional sense, far less fully educated than Boileau or Racine, or then many a scholar of their day, he contrived to become every bit as cultured, reading widely, retentively, and with unsurpassed sureness of taste. His knowledge of literature, if somewhat haphazard and incomplete, was alive with feeling and critical sensitivity. Sympathetic to the art of distant times and places, he could relish the beauties of Virgil or Marot, and make imaginary journeys to the land of Plato or Boccaccio. He had the double gift of visualizing authors of earlier ages in their faraway setting and of seeing in them possibilities for modernization or imitation to satisfy the needs of his own age.

As he perfected his style, he kept in mind a multitude of models. He would try one manner after another, or mingle several at once, sometimes following a book and echoing its qualities of expression, sometimes drawing on his rich store of literary memories. The disciple of many poets and story tellers, the conscious and unconscious imitator of many versions of many traditional themes, he inevitably developed a style marked by the interplay of a host of almost inseparable influences. Malherbe and Virgil and Horace, even Homer, contributed something to the polished eloquence and ornateness of his tales and fables, just as their more familiar accents owe something to Marot and their precious ones to Voiture. An awareness of the narrative techniques of Ovid and Rabelais and Boccaccio must have aided him in his mastery of fiction, his handling of such problems as plotting, plausibility, suspense, surprise. Without Terence and Molière his comic gifts would have been slighter and his use of dialogue less skillful. Plato and Plutarch and Montaigne all had some share in the growth of his moral attitudes and even in the questioning, reflective qualities which are characteristic of his poetic style. All these and others too—Ronsard, Ariosto, Marino, d'Urfé, to name only a few—are the real sources of his art, far more than the mere subject matter which he borrows from Phaedrus or Aesop or some story collection.

His complex style, his complete freedom of expression, his drastic and total revision of source material, did not come to him quickly

and naturally but were attained after long years of practice and experimentation. All his early works, his failures as well as his successes, helped to prepare him for the tales and fables. *L'Eunuque* initiated him to many artistic problems: the difficulties of strict imitation, the creation of effective scenes in dialogue, the methods of portraying character. In *Adonis* he expressed his aspiration to compose serious, elevated poetry, an aspiration which he would partially abandon in favor of "un certain charme," a lighter touch which could win him more readers. His "pension poétique" for the amusement of Fouquet opened his eyes to the demands of an aristocratic public and showed him the advantage of exploiting his own personality. The fragments of *Le Songe de Vaux*, like *Clymène* a little later, reveal his hesitant trial of various genres and his intense concern with questions of style and form. In *Le Voyage en Limousin* and *Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard* he came closer to everyday life and tried his hand at writing realistic, humorous stories. By this time he stood on the brink of the tales in verse but even here he paused to decide between two manners, to ponder various theories, and to test the reaction of his audience. The fables had their evolution too, beginning with short anecdotes in imitation of Phaedrus and then becoming far richer, far more varied, far more independent and personal in conception. As La Fontaine progressed through this winding course he never strayed very far and never lost sight of the goal ahead. He was sure of his talents, sure that his efforts were not wasted. He knew that he would ultimately find the right tones and the right vehicle for his poetic genius.

Along the way he composed many works which, even though unevenly executed, still possess great intrinsic literary worth. The disunity of conception visible in *L'Eunuque* and in *Le Songe de Vaux* does not prevent these pieces from possessing many rewarding passages and scenes, many lines of verse as memorable as anything in the tales and fables. The letters of *Le Voyage en Limousin* are unsurpassed in the epistolary literature of seventeenth-century France; they are invaluable for anyone who wishes to understand the warmth and playfulness and exuberance of an author who could write scintillating prose but who felt more at home in poetry. La Fontaine's versatility and mimicry, along with his seriousness as an artist and as a lover, are all to be seen in *Clymène*, an extremely graceful work which has long needed to be restored to a reputable place among



his writings. The cycle of four elegies and above all *Adonis* reveal a poet far different from the one who composed the tales and fables: less mature and less urbane, to be sure, but more passionate and more earnest in his pursuit of a beautiful vision. Thanks to Valéry, thanks also to the recent revival of interest in baroque or preclassical French poetry, the vehement luxuriance of *Adonis* has emerged from three centuries of neglect and has found many admirers. It is important to realize that La Fontaine was an accomplished poet at least ten years before his first real fame in 1668. Better than any other classical writer he bridges the gap between two distinct periods in seventeenth-century French literature and illustrates the trends which characterize each one. *Adonis* and some of his other early productions lack the discreet, flawless, gemlike quality of his best fables and tales, but their ardent lyricism gives them no less a claim to greatness.

After a long upward struggle he finally reached level ground and saw wide vistas ahead. At this climactic point in his career he conceived almost simultaneously the two genres which would always remain his specialties, gave deep thought to the aesthetic properties which they required, quickly perfected them, and began striding forward at a greatly increased pace. Like every true artist he was obliged to create his own medium. Taking something from the epigram, the folktale, the satire, the stories by Rabelais and Boccaccio, he evolved the tale in verse, a deliciously playful kind of fantasy, a make-believe sharing of secrets in intimate conversational tones. Similarly, he found in the bald monotony of Aesop and Phaedrus the material with which to invent a wholly new genre, infinitely varied, cunningly fragile yet vigorous in its form, dreamlike yet full of concrete observation of mankind, pungently humorous yet tinged with melancholy, amusingly personal yet endowed with the wisdom of the ages. For both the tales and the fables he worked out and mastered an unprecedented style which is uniquely appropriate, a style which many later and less talented poets would try in vain to imitate. As Charles Perrault said of him: "Jamais personne n'a mieux mérité d'être regardé comme original. . . . Non seulement il a inventé le genre de poésie, ou il s'est appliqué, mais il l'a porté à sa dernière perfection."<sup>1</sup> An exceedingly conscious artist, always pre-occupied with aesthetic problems and techniques, he was supremely gifted to achieve his aims.

All this happened in the decade when he was roughly 35 to 45 years old. At a time when most artists see their powers declining he was reaching the peak of his originality and productivity. In 1668 he still possessed the charm and vigor of youth, of youth that would become eternal. The springlike freshness of his poetry, as of his personality, stayed with him all his life and has remained unforgettably alive across the centuries.

# Notes and References.

The following pages aim to provide the essential bibliographical and reference material for each section of the book. Only the most valuable sources of information are cited, as a rule, although occasionally it has seemed useful to warn against certain studies which are inadequate or unreliable. The system of references employed throughout the book will be maintained here, with a few more abbreviations for frequently recurring authorities: *PMLA* is the official short title of *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*; *RHLF* stands for the *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*; and *E et R* is used to represent a most important book by Ferdinand Gohin, *La Fontaine, études et recherches*, Paris, [1937]. Titles of other books and periodicals are given in slightly abridged form wherever feasible. All books mentioned were published in Paris unless another place is specified.

## GENERAL STUDIES.

La Fontaine's early biographers, such as Perrault, D'Olivet, and Marais, need not be listed here; they will be cited *passim* whenever reference is made to them. A good catalogue of such biographical documents is to be found in *OD*, pp. xiii-xviii.

The nineteenth century saw many pioneer studies of La Fontaine's life and works which, while still readable and interesting, have naturally been superseded by later scholarship. Worthy of mention are the biographies by C. A. Walckenaer and by Paul Mesnard (the latter appearing in vol. I of Régnier), the two versions of Hippolyte Taine's thesis on the fables, and the sensitive commentary by Saint-Marc Girardin, *La Fontaine et les fabulistes*.

Many twentieth-century biographical and literary interpretations offer little of interest to serious students. Georges Lafenestre's *La Fontaine* (2nd ed., 1905) is a popular but highly intelligent book, better than other, subsequent studies by Frank Hamel (London, 1911), Emile Faguet (1913), André Hallays (1922), Léon Garnier (1937), and Auguste Bailly (1937).

The year 1913 marks the beginning of an intense revival of scholarly activity devoted to La Fontaine. The lively, well-documented book by Louis Roche, *La Vie de Jean de La Fontaine* (1913), is still the poet's best biography and the two pedestrian volumes by Gustave Michaut, *La Fontaine* (1913-14), remain the most complete study of his life and works. Michaut's work is supplemented by an important article, "Travaux récents sur La Fontaine," in *RHLF*, XXIII (1916), 63-106. Ferdinand Gohin has contributed, along with *E et R*, various major books and articles, more specialized in scope, which will be cited as the occasion arises.

Other very good general studies of the poet's life and writings include: Karl Vossler, *La Fontaine und sein Fabelwerk* (Heidelberg, 1919); Vittorio Lugli, *Il Prodigio di La Fontaine* (Messina-Milan, 1939); and Jean Giraudoux, *Les Cinq Tentations de La Fontaine* (1938), this last quite personal and unreliable but extremely perceptive and very gracefully written. Finally, Pierre Clarac, the editor of *OD*, has provided a brief but brilliant book which sums up the present state of scholarly research: *La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre* (1947).

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## I, 1. Family background (pages 1-4).

Roche's biography is the best source of information on La Fontaine's ancestors, parents, and relatives.

1. Charles Perrault, *Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle* (1696) I, 83.

## I,2. Studies in school (pages 4-7).

Facts and theories about La Fontaine's education are studied in detail by various biographers, such as Roche and Clarac. See also "Un livre de classe de La Fontaine" in *E et R*, pp. 163-166.

1. See D'Olivet's biographical sketch of La Fontaine in Pellisson and D'Olivet, *Histoire de l'Académie Française*, ed. Charles L. Livet (1858), II, 296-311, referred to hereafter simply as D'Olivet. D'Olivet's information, much of which came to him from Maucroix, is far more accurate for La Fontaine's mature years than for his youth.

2. The document is provided by Louis Tuetey, "La Fontaine maître particulier des eaux et forêts," *Revue Bleue*, XXXIV (1897), 246-247.

3. *Fables*, IX, 5; see also I, 19, etc.

4. For details see *OD*, 984.

5. *Luciani Samosatensis dialogi selecti* . . . (Poitiers, 1621).

## I,3. Religious instruction (pages 7-10).

There are three excellent but divergent studies of the question: Pierre Clarac, "La Fontaine et Port-Royal," *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie et . . . de la civilisation*, XI (new series, 1933), 1-31, 147-171; "La Religion de La Fontaine" in *E et R*, pp. 103-123; and a chapter in Henri Busson, *La Religion des classiques* (1948), pp. 271-297. Background material can be found in Adolphe Perraud, *L'Oratoire de France au 17<sup>e</sup> et au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1865) and in Charles Hamel, *Histoire de l'abbaye et du collège de Juilly* (3rd ed., 1888).

## I,4. Aspirations as a poet (pages 11-16).

For La Fontaine's knowledge of legal matters see Louis Guignot, "L'Esprit juridique dans les Fables de La Fontaine," *RHLF*, XXXII (1925), 177-211. The Round Table is discussed at length by recent biographers; various similar groups have been studied by Josephine de Boer, "Men's Literary Circles in Paris, 1610-1660," *PMLA*, LIII (1938), 730-780. Maucroix needs much further study, in spite of a few facts gleaned here and there by Jean Demeure, in spite of fictitious pieces inspired by his famous love affair (e.g. by Edmond Pilon in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July 1, 1921). There is a pertinent article, although it barely scratches the surface, by R. W. Ladbrough: "Francois Maucroix's Friendship with La Fontaine," *Mod. Lang. Review*, XXXIV (1939), 223-229.

1. Bibliothèque Nationale, Manuscrit français No. 19,142. In addition to the verses on La Fontaine the MS contains various short pieces by Maucroix and some epistles written to one another by Maucroix, Pellisson, and Cassandre (fol. 82-105). One epistle pays compliments to Patru, Chapelain, Gombauld, Conrart, and Tallemant des Réaux (fol. 84); another relates the events of a meeting at Pellisson's house (fol. 98).

2. In one of his articles on *Psyché*, Jean Demeure concurs that Cliton should very probably be identified as La Fontaine: *Merc. de France*, CCI (1928), 349-350.

## I, 5. The forest warden (pages 16-21).

Among many discussions of La Fontaine's feeling for nature the most useful are: Joseph Vianey, "Les Grands Poètes de la nature en France," *Revue des Cours et Conférences*, XXVII (1925-26, part I), 10-19; Alf Christensen, "Le Sentiment de la nature dans les fables de La Fontaine," *Edda*, XXIX (1929), 353-379; and Daniel Mornet, *Histoire de la littérature française classique* (1940), pp. 275-300.

1. Tallemant des Réaux, *Historiettes*, ed. Georges Mongrédien, Classiques Garnier, 8 vols. (n.d.), II, 230-231.

2. Cited by Tuetey (see above, this page).

## I, 6. The butterfly on Parnassus (pages 21-27).

The various studies by Clarac show a very sure understanding of La Fontaine's character. See also "Le Caractère de La Fontaine" in *E et R*, pp. 3-17, and Léon-Paul Fargue, "Jean de La Fontaine," *Nouv. Revue Française*, XLIV (1935), 519-537.

1. Jacques Vergier, *Œuvres* (London, 1780), III, 193.

2. *OD*, 642-644. See also *Clymène* (Inégal en amour, en plaisir, en affaire, *OD*, 30), the preface to *Galatée* (L'inconstance et l'inquiétude qui me sont si naturelles . . . *OD*, 405), etc.

3. Perrault, *Hommes illustres*, I, 83.

4. André Gide, *Voyage au Congo* (1928), p. 10. Along with Gide, Valéry, and Giraudoux, Charles Maurras has acclaimed La Fontaine as one of the very greatest French poets, not only in the fables but in many other works too; see the *Dictionnaire politique et critique établi par les soins de Pierre Chardon* (1932), II, 380-384.

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II, 1. Terence—*L'Eunuque* (pages 28-36).

*L'Eunuque* has been studied in some detail by Michaut (I, 71-86) and Lugli (pp. 23-32).

1. Is there some significance in the signature "Conrart" at the end of the *privilege*?

2. See a manuscript comment by Brienne, cited by Clarac in "La Fontaine et Port-Royal" (see above, page 222) and Palaprat and Brueys, *Le Muet* (1693), Préface.

II, 2. Ovid-*Adonis* (pages 36-48).

The best appreciations of *Adonis* are those by Lugli (pp. 37-48) and by Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'*Adonis*," *Revue de Paris*, XXVIII, part 1 (1921), 540-562, reprinted in his *Variété* and in an edition of *Adonis*. Translated by Malcolm Cowley, Valéry's article has appeared twice in the U. S., in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (1926) and *Variety* (New York, 1927). See also an important article by G. Guisan, "L'Évolution de l'art de La Fontaine d'après les variantes de l'*Adonis*," *RHLF*, XLII (1935), 161-180, 321-343; but Guisan fails to detect the poet's many signs of haste or fatigue as he retouched the latter part of his poem. In my comments on *Adonis* I disregard variants and deal with the revised text published in 1669.

1. E.g. Ovid's description of the indistinct borderline between night and day (*Metamorphoses*, IV, 409-411; also *Amores*, I, v, 6), recalled first in the *Voyage en Limousin* (*OD*, 561), then again in a fable (X, 14). The spectacle of ants at work, which had impressed both Ovid (*Met.*, VII, 624-626) and Virgil (*Aeneid*, IV, 402-407), returns as a theme in the fables, in *Psyché*, and in *Saint Malc*.

2. Racine, *Œuvres*, *Grands Écrivains de la France* ed., (1865-86), VI, 487-494.

3. Saint-Gelais, *Œuvres*, ed. P. Blanchemain, (1873), I, 127-132. La Fontaine refers to him in *Contes*, II, Préface.

4. Ronsard, *Œuvres*, ed. P. Laumonier (Collection Lemerre, 1914-19), IV, 26-37.

5. *Ibid.*, III, 209-215.

6. *Cours de littérature* (ed. of 1816), VI, 37-39.

7. Valéry, p. 542.

## II, 3. Virgil and Horace (pages 49-61).

La Fontaine's collaboration with Louis Giry was partially discovered by Paul de Laparent, *RHLF*, XXIV (1917), 560-567, then recognized more fully in a most erratic book by Colonel Simon Godchot, *La Fontaine et Saint Augustin* (1919). As far as I know, the

poet's debt to Virgil has never been studied in any detail. My pages on Horace were written before I could locate a copy of the little-known book by Alcide Macé, *La Fontaine et Horace* (Rennes, 1944); Macé's study is a solid one but too far-reaching in its conclusions as to Horace's influence. The effect of Horace on the poet's moral outlook has been treated, also with much exaggeration, by Jean Cousin, "La Fontaine stoïcien," *Revue des Cours et Conférences*, XXXVII (1935), 167-181. Similarities of technique in the two poets are discussed by Leo Spitzer in an important article, "Die Kunst des Übergangs bei La Fontaine," *PMLA*, LIII (1938), 393-433.

1. Charles Du Bos, "Third Centenary of La Fontaine's Birth," *Nation and Athenaeum*, XXIX (1921), 798.

2. See *OD*, II and 15; *Fables*, III, 12; *OD*, 40; *Aeneid*, V, 257 and XII, 309; *Georgics*, I, 386; and *Bucolics*, III, 73.

3. D'Olivet, II, 304.

4. Horace, *Odes*, I, vi, 9-10; the idea recurs throughout his comparison between himself and Pindar, *Odes*, IV, 2, and in his epistle to Augustus, II, i, 257-259.

#### II, 4. The legacy of Latin literature (pages 61-67).

There are two very stimulating studies of the influence of ancient literatures upon the modern world, although they have little to say about La Fontaine: Henri Peyre, *L'Influence des littératures antiques sur la littérature française moderne* (New Haven, 1941) and Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York and London, 1949). For La Fontaine's knowledge of Seneca see an untrustworthy book by Colonel Simon Godchot, *La Fontaine et Sénèque* (Saint-Cloud, 1930) and an article, important for some of the later fables, by Mario Roques, "La Composition de la fable... *Le Vieillard et les trois jeunes hommes*," *RHLF*, XII (1905), 227-232.

1. For other echoes of Propertius see Régnier, especially VIII, 355-374.

#### II, 5. The glory that was Greece (pages 68-81).

Among La Fontaine's Greek forebears only Plato has received much attention. An early study by Léon Boulvé, *De Fontanio Platonis studioso* (1897), has been almost wholly superseded by Gohin's excellent chapter, "La Fontaine et Platon," in *E et R*, pp. 19-62.

1. *OD*, 225. Cf. Racine's admiration for Amyot, *Mithridate*, Préface.

2. Roche, pp. 404-408.

3. D'Olivet, II, 306.

4. This and the next two references to Louis Racine may be found in Jean Racine, *Œuvres*, I, 334.

5. For this and the next reference to Sainte-Beuve, see *Premiers Lundis* (1874-75), III, 389.

6. At the beginning of La Fontaine's version of *La Vie d'Esope*.

7. Nouvelles acquisitions françaises, MS. 4,333, fol. 131-132.

8. See parallels cited by Régnier, VII, 597-628.

9. Shelley, Prologue to *Hellas*.

10. *Contes*, V, 2; see also *Fables*, VII, 13, and many other allusions to Troy.

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#### III, 1. The illusion of Vaux (pages 82-87).

Among many books on Fouquet and his palace at Vaux, these two have proved quite useful: *Le Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte*, engravings by Rodolphe Pfnor, text by Anatole

France (1888), and *Le Surintendant Nicolas Fouquet, protecteur des lettres, des arts et des sciences* by Urbain-Victor Chatelain (1905). See also W. P. Fischer, *The Literary Relations between La Fontaine and the "Astrée" of Honoré d'Urfé* (Philadelphia, 1913), and T. W. Busson, "Mme de Sévigné et La Fontaine," *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XLI (1926), 239-242.

1. Ed. of 1661, Part V, pp. 1099-1142.

2. *Causeries du lundi*, 3rd ed. (Garnier, n.d.), VII, 522-523.

### III, 2. Villon to Voiture—the "pension poétique" (pages 88-99).

The relations between medieval and classical French literature have been studied in a very important book by Nathan Edelman, *Attitudes of Seventeenth Century France toward the Middle Ages* (New York, 1946). La Fontaine's debt to Marot is treated, rather poorly, by Walther de Lerber, *L'Influence de Clément Marot aux 17<sup>e</sup> et 18<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Lausanne, 1920), and his debt to Voiture is stressed briefly by J. Haraszati, "En glanant chez La Fontaine," *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XXXVI (1921), 264-272. Two versions of a "relation" composed for Fouquet and a newly found poem which may have formed part of the "pension poétique" are discussed in my article, "An Unpublished Manuscript by La Fontaine," *PMLA*, LXVI (1951), 1183-1188.

1. Cf. Edelman, pp. 292-293.

2. *OD*, 31. See also his jingle in a letter to Saint-Evremond (*OD*, 672), where he professes his ignorance of poets prior to Marot: "Je ne sais qui fut son maître."

3. D'Olivet, II, 305-306.

4. Jean Marot, *Le Doctrinal*, rondeau IV, "De promettre et tenir."

5. Sarasin, *Œuvres*, ed. P. Festugière (1926), I, 380-386.

6. *Ibid.*, I, 123.

### III, 3. Malherbe and the odes (pages 99-105).

For a more detailed treatment of this subject see my article, "La Fontaine as Critic and Student of Malherbe," *Symposium*, III (1949), 130-139, and three chapters by Gohin in *E et R*, pp. 167-210. Clarac takes exception to certain views held by Gohin and myself; cf. *OD*, 935-936 and 979-980.

1. D'Olivet, II, 304.

2. See Régnier, VIII, 391.

### III, 4. Ronsard and the elegies (pages 105-110).

La Fontaine's debt to Ronsard seems not to have been studied elsewhere. For an interesting historical survey of the elegy during the French Renaissance see Robert G. Mahieu, "L'Élégie au 16<sup>e</sup> siècle," *RHLF*, XLVI (1939), 145-179. La Fontaine's elegy for Fouquet has received considerable attention, e.g. Tristan Derème, "Autour de La Fontaine et de ses élégies," *Revue universelle*, XXX (1927), 385-403, and Jean L. Cordey, "L'Élégie aux Nymphes de Vaux," *Trésors des bibliothèques*, V (1935), 41-46.

1. *OD*, 486-487. The two shorter pieces survive in a seventeenth-century manuscript, possibly in the hand of La Fontaine, at the Houghton Library, Harvard University (Lowell Collection, 2509.5).

2. The passage which begins: Cum bene pertaesum est, animoque relanguit ardor... (*Amores*, II, ix, 27-34).

3. *Œuvres complètes*, ed. P. Laumonier (Textes français modernes, 1914- ), XII, 256-277.

### III, 5. *Le Songe de Vaux* (pages 111-117).

For the relations between *Le Songe de Vaux* and *Psyché* see two very important articles by Jean Demeure: "Les quatre amis de *Psyché*," *Merc. de France*, CCI (1928), 331-366, and

"L'introuvable société des 'Quatre Amis,'" *RHLF*, XXXVI (1929), 161-180, 321-336. Other excellent studies of *Psyché* by U.-V. Chatelain, Thierry Maulnier (J. Talagrand), and Marcel Raymond, do not pertain to the subject of the present book. On La Fontaine's artistic sensitivity see a good article by Georges Lafenestre, "La Fontaine et les artistes de son temps," *Le Correspondent*, CLXXXIX (1897), 333-347; a less useful one by Prosper Dorbec, "La sensibilité plastique et picturale dans la littérature du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle," *RHLF*, XXVI (1919), 374-395; and some penetrating remarks by E. B. O. Borgerhoff, *The Freedom of French Classicism* (Princeton, 1950), pp. 132-149.

1. Text available in Clarac, *La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre*, p. 182. The squirrel motif comes from Fouquet's coat of arms. The fable tells the story of a squirrel who survives a severe storm, and thus seems to date from late 1661 or else 1662.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### IV, 1. From Vaux to Limousin (pages 118-128).

The reasons for Jannart's exile (but not La Fontaine's) are made clear by Léon Petit, "Autour du procès Fouquet: La Fontaine et son oncle Jannart sous la griffe de Colbert," *RHLF*, XLVII (1947), 193-210. The various studies by Clarac offer the surest information on the poet's relationship with his wife; a reconciliation between them around 1693 is fairly definitely established in Clarac's article, "Six pages inédites de La Fontaine," *RHLF*, LI (1951), 61-68. Gustave Lanson has made some excellent comments on La Fontaine as a letter writer, in his *Choix de lettres du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 5th ed. (1898), pp. 525-526.

1. Racine, *Œuvres*, VI, 494.

2. *Ibid.*, I, 328.

3. *Ibid.*, VI, 412-416.

#### IV, 2. The realistic tradition—*Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard* (pages 128-139).

On Rabelais and La Fontaine only a few minor details are treated in the article by Spire Pitou (*Mod. Lang. Notes*, 1950) and in those by A. Cavens and O. Servan (*Revue du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 1922 and 1927). Another study by Cavens is quite thorough, if superficial: "L'Influence de Rabelais sur La Fontaine," *La Renaissance d'Occident*, XXVI (1928), 177-216. On Montaigne and La Fontaine see a chapter by Gohin, *E et R*, pp. 63-80; P. C. King, "Montaigne as a source of La Fontaine's fable, *La Mort et le mourant*," *PMLA*, LII (1937) 1101-1113; and some brief remarks by Alan M. Boase in *The Fortunes of Montaigne* (London, 1935), pp. 396-404. "La Fontaine et Molière" by Pietro Toldo, *RHLF*, XVIII (1911), 733-766, is a discussion of parallel themes.

1. See *Contes*, I, 4; II, 2, 10, 11; etc.

2. *Fables*, IV, 12 and V, 11; cited in H. Régner, I, 317, 399-400.

3. See *La Doctrine des mœurs* (1646), p. 97. Gomberville's old man, like La Fontaine's, is building a house. This detail is not to be found in Abstemius or Montaigne.

4. The manuscript is deposited at Houghton Library, Harvard University.

5. *OD*, 354. Cf. *Les Précieuses ridicules*, scene xi.

#### IV, 3. The manuscript *Contes* (pages 139-145).

La Fontaine's first tales have been studied perfunctorily by Michaut (I, 185-201), who dismisses everything before *Joconde* as insignificant.

1. See *OD*, 581-583 for the three short poems inspired by La Fontaine's acquaintances at the Luxembourg palace.



2. MS. 5418, pp. 147-170.

3. The variants are available in Régnier, IV, 81, 104, 109, 111, etc.

4. The preface continues, to be sure, and takes up certain questions such as licentiousness, satire of women, and verisimilitude, but here La Fontaine is speaking of later tales imitated from Ariosto and Boccaccio and seems to be replying to criticisms leveled at his volume published in 1664.

#### IV, 4. Ariosto—*Joconde* (pages 145-151).

For La Fontaine's Italian sources see a pamphlet by Maria Zamara, *Il Verdizzotti e il La Fontaine* (Piacenza, n.d.), and the articles by Pietro Toldo, "Fonti e propaggini italiane delle favole del La Fontaine," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* LIX (1912), 1-46, 249-311. A good study of Ariosto and La Fontaine has been done by Alexandre Cioranescu, *L'Arioste en France, des origines à la fin du 18e siècle* (1938), vol. II, ch. 3. On the much debated question of La Fontaine's relations with Boileau the essential studies are: René Bray, "La Dissertation sur *Joconde* est-elle de Boileau?" *RHLF*, XXXVIII (1931), 337-354, 497-517; Antoine Adam, "L'Ecole de 1660, histoire ou légende?" *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie* . . . New series, VII (1939), 215-250; and a very good chapter by Clarac in *La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre*, pp. 48-57.

1. *Boniface et le pédant* (1633).

2. Text available in Régnier, IV, 527-541.

3. Boileau, *Satire X* (1694), line 52.

#### IV, 5. Theory of the tale in verse (pages 151-158).

La Fontaine's *vers libres* have been studied in various works by Maurice Grammont, in *L'Evolution du vers français au 17e siècle* by Maurice Souriau (1893), and most thoroughly of all by Ferdinand Gohin in *L'Art de La Fontaine dans ses fables* (1929). See also an appreciation by André Thérive, "Le Poète enchaîné," *Revue critique des idées et des livres*, XXXII (1921), 665-677, and a historical survey by René Bray, "L'Introduction des *vers mêlés* sur la scène classique," *PMLA*, LXVI (1951), 456-484. Jean Royère has more than once made brilliant but haphazard comments on La Fontaine's verse technique; see especially his book *Le Musicisme: Boileau, La Fontaine, Baudelaire* (1929).

1. Byron, *Works*, ed. Coleridge and Pleilher (London, 1905-24), VI, 62.

#### IV, 6. Boccaccio—Part II of the *Contes* (pages 158-166).

See Pietro Toldo, "Come il La Fontaine s'ispirasse al Boccaccio" in *Studii dedicati a Francesco Torraca*, (Naples, 1912), and Vittorio F. Borri, *Le Novelle del Decameron imitate de La Fontaine* (Trieste, 1914). N. Cacudi offers some useful information but reaches all the wrong conclusions in his *La Fontaine imitateur de Boccace* (Besançon, 1924). Emile Montégut praises Boccaccio at the expense of La Fontaine in "*La Fiancée du roi de Garbe et le Décaméron*," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 2nd period, XLV (1863), 721-736, and André Bellesort makes some penetrating comments in "Réflexions sur La Fontaine," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 6th period, XVIII (1913), 873-909. For the poet's "impressionistic" syntax and vocabulary see the interesting studies by Heinrich Wiemann, *Impressionismus im Sprachgebrauch La Fontaines* (Münster, 1934) and by Josef Mousset, *Der Stil La Fontaines in seinen Contes* (Münster, 1936), and also the less useful articles by Otto Kötz, "Der Sprachgebrauch La Fontaines in seinen Fabeln," *Die Neueren Sprachen*, XVII (1909-10), 257-278, 321-340, 402-420.

1. Chapelain, *Lettres*, ed. Tamizey de Larroque (1880-83), II, 439-440.

2. Cf. Le Maçon (Rouen, 1603), pp. 51-56.

3. Musset, Prologue to *Silvia*.

4. Cf. the *Decameron*, II, 10 and III, 6.
5. Lugli, pp. 112-115.

\* \* \* \* \*

V, 1. *Clymène*—ideas on poetry (pages 167-178).

Théodore de Banville admired *Clymène* and seems to have found it a source of inspiration; see his *Petit traité de poésie française* (ed. of 1891), pp. 301-328, and M. Fuchs, "Banville et la *Clymène* de La Fontaine," *RHLF*, XXX (1923), 230-231. Some of La Fontaine's theories and techniques have been studied, rather superficially, by Colbert Searles in "La Fontaine's Imitation," *Philological Quarterly*, I (1922), 56-70.

1. Cf. the epilogue which follows Book VI of the fables:

Amour, ce tyran de ma vie,  
Veut que je change de sujets:  
Il faut contenter son envie.  
Retournons à Psyché . . .

2. These opinions are cited at length in Régnier, VII, 143-145.
3. Lafenestre, *La Fontaine*, pp. 52-54.
4. Clarac, *La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre*, p. 104.

V, 2. The manuscript fables—Phaedrus (pages 178-188).

For information on La Fontaine's possible sources see various scholarly editions, especially Régnier, and the unreliable studies by P. L. Solvet, *Études sur La Fontaine* (1812) and by A. C. M. Robert, *Fables inédites des 12e, 13e et 14e siècles et fables de La Fontaine rapprochées . . .* (1825). Some useful remarks on the Conrart manuscript are made by Margarete Cordemann, *Der Umschwung der Kunst zwischen der ersten and zweiten Fabelsammlung La Fontaines* (Munich, 1917). Louis Havet makes a comparison between Phaedrus and La Fontaine in "La Fable du loup et du chien," *Revue des études anciennes*, XXIII (1921), 95-102.

1. He did have various British predecessors (Samuel Rowlands, John Ogilby, etc.) who had done English renderings of Aesop or Phaedrus, but it seems unlikely that he ever heard of them. See M. E. Smith, "Notes on the Rimed Fable in England," *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XXXI (1916), 206-216.
2. Arsenal Library, MS. 5420, pp. 533-539.
3. Y<sup>F</sup>, no. 8, in 4°.

V, 3. Aesop in the fables of 1668 (pages 188-198).

La Fontaine's treatment of Aesopic source material has been discussed by René Bray in his useful volume in the series *Les Grands Événements Littéraires*, *Les Fables de La Fontaine* (1929), pp. 73-90, and also by Maurice Grammont in various articles on individual fables, e.g. *Le Français moderne*, I (1933), 97-115 and *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, XXXII (1935), 91-108.

1. See the end of the preface of 1668 and the first paragraph of *La Vie d'Esope*.
2. See the commentary in Régnier, I, 77.
3. The letter, found and studied by Clarac, is available in *RHLF*, LI (1951), 61-68.
4. To one of them, whose name began with B (perhaps Brienne?) he expressed his thanks in an important prefatory fable (V, 1): "Votre goût a servi de règle à mon ouvrage."

## V, 4. Theory of the fable in verse (pages 199-206).

La Fontaine's theory and practice as a moralist have been repeatedly discussed. Some of the better essays on the subject are: Remy de Gourmont, "La Morale dans les *Fables* de La Fontaine," *Merc. de France*, LVIII (1905), 24-39; Gabriel Brunet, "L'Art de vivre dans l'œuvre de La Fontaine," *Merc. de France*, CXLIX (1921), 40-69; Karl Kožesník, "Kunstproblem und Moral in Lafontaines Fabeln," *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, LVI (1932), 479-490; Theophil Spoerri, "Der Aufstand des Fabel," *Trivium*, I (1942), 31-63; and a chapter by Gohin in *E et R*, pp. 125-141. There is still need for a good study of the subject, paying less attention to moral maxims and more to the total meaning of each fable (*i.e.* its esthetic, intellectual, emotional, and humorous content).

## V, 5. Illustration and publication of the fables (pages 206-215).

For an excellent non-technical study of emblem literature see Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London, 1948). Fuller historical and bibliographical information is to be found in W. Kayser, *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk* (Berne, 1948) and in Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery*, 2 vols. (London, 1939, 1947). La Fontaine as critic and flatterer of Louis XIV has been appraised in various ways, *e.g.* by Jean Longnon, "Comment La Fontaine a écrit les *Fables*," *Revue universelle*, XXXI (1927), 290-300; by Jules Wogue, "Les Idées politiques et sociales de La Fontaine," *Revue politique et littéraire*, LXXI (1933), 529-533, 558-562; and by Alois Hornung, "La Fontaine. Eine Kulturkundliche Untersuchung," *Zeitschrift für französischen und englischen Unterricht*, XXVIII (1929), 321-335, 415-431. The article by Leo Spitzer (cited above, p. 224), provides some clues to the arrangement of themes in the fable volume of 1668.

1. James Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in France* (Ithaca, 1946), pp. 478-479.
2. Vossler, *La Fontaine und sein Fabelwerk*, pp. 135-137.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Conclusion (pages 216-220).

1. Perrault, *Les Hommes illustres*, I, 83.



# Index

This index is limited to names of persons and to titles of certain works by La Fontaine (tales, fables, and other major compositions), these being listed alphabetically under La Fontaine's name. Many of his letters and short poems are omitted from the index.

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